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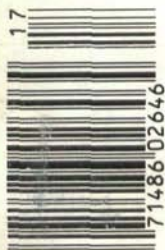
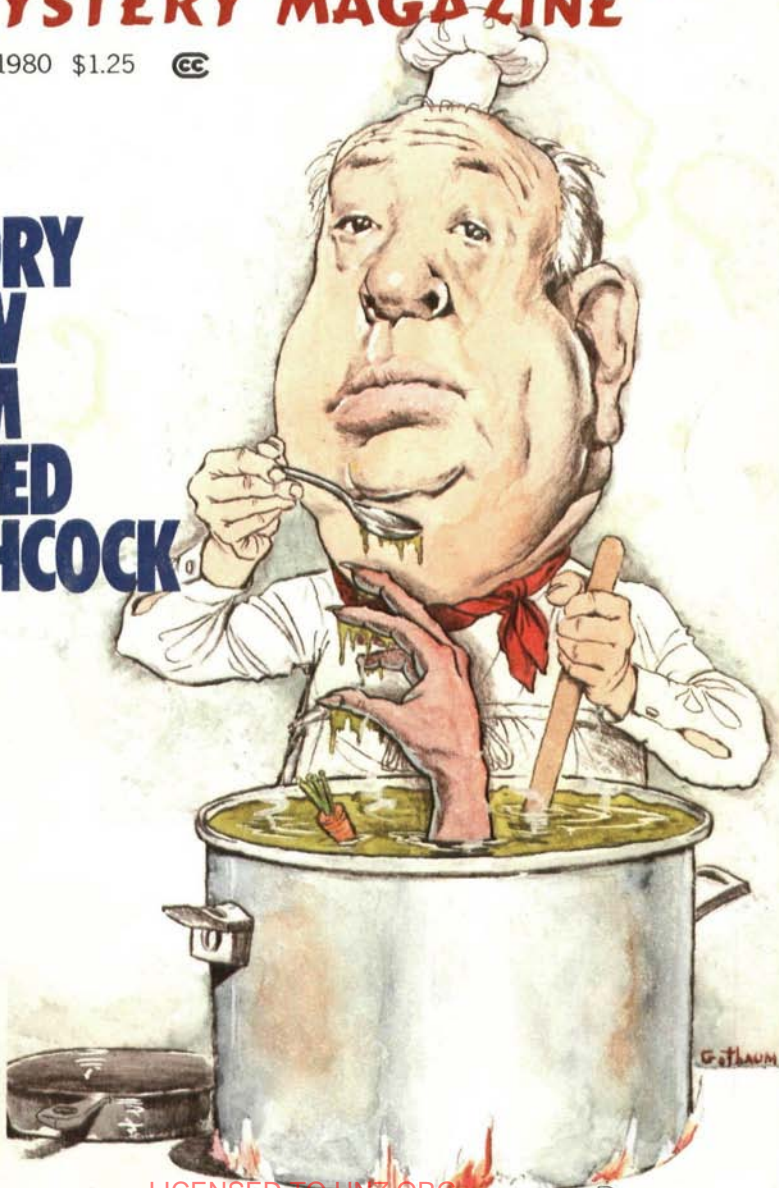
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## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL 23, 1980 \$1.25



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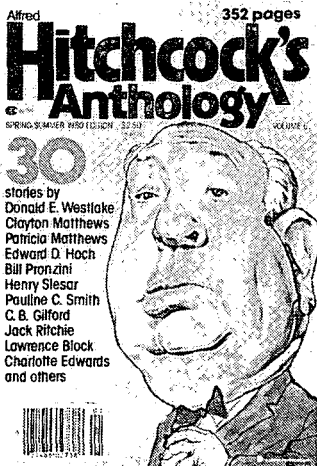
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VOLUME 25, NO. 4

APRIL 23, 1980

ALFRED

# HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEXT  
ISSUE  
ON SALE  
APRIL 24

## SHORT STORIES

NOTHING TO LOSE <i>by William Bankier</i> .....	5
THE GAME AS IT IS PLAYED <i>by Henry Slesar</i> .....	16
WHERE THERE'S A WILL <i>by Jean Darling</i> .....	22
AUCTION AT MCKAY'S CORNERS <i>by Alan K. Young</i> .....	31
SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE <i>by Larry Powell</i> .....	46
SHAKEDOWN <i>by John H. Dirckx</i> .....	55
THE EVILS OF DRINK <i>by Richard Deming</i> .....	60
SAFE DELIVERY <i>by Tonita S. Gardner</i> .....	72
THE NINE EELS OF MADAME WU <i>by Edward D. Hoch</i> .....	80
BORN VICTIM <i>by Jeffry Scott</i> .....	95
THE BIG ONE <i>by Betty Ren Wright</i> .....	99
THE ATTACHÉ CASE <i>by Ernest Savage</i> .....	107

## MOVIES AND TELEVISION

CRIME ON SCREEN <i>by Peter Christian</i> .....	122
---	-----

LETTERS .....	53
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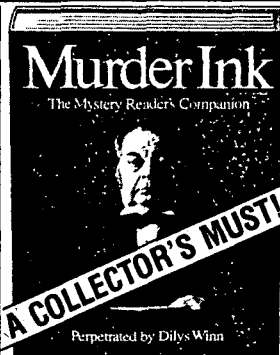
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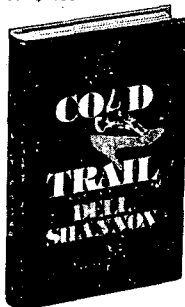
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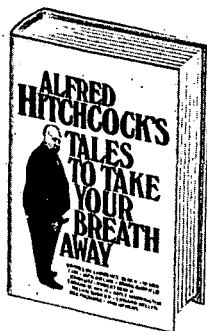
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April 23, 1980



Dear Reader:

It's an old saying that you can choose your friends but you can't choose your relatives, and this month's issue shows that sometimes relatives choose to do something about that.

A pair of elderly siblings stand to inherit from their mother in Jean Darling's "Where There's a Will." A young man has problems with his feisty grandmother in "Auction at McKay's Corners" by Alan K. Young. Old wounds are reopened by the brothers in William Bankier's story of dangerous sibling rivalry, "Nothing To Lose." And a woman's troubles with her brother-in-law come to a head in "The Big One" by Betty Ren Wright, as do the machinations of a greedy nephew in "Safe Delivery" by Tonita S. Gardner.

Even though you can choose your mate, marriage can be another battlefield—as in Richard Deming's story, "The Evils of Drink." But Ernest Savage gives us a more hopeful note about family relationships in "The Attaché Case."

Good reading.

*Reyes Hitchcock*

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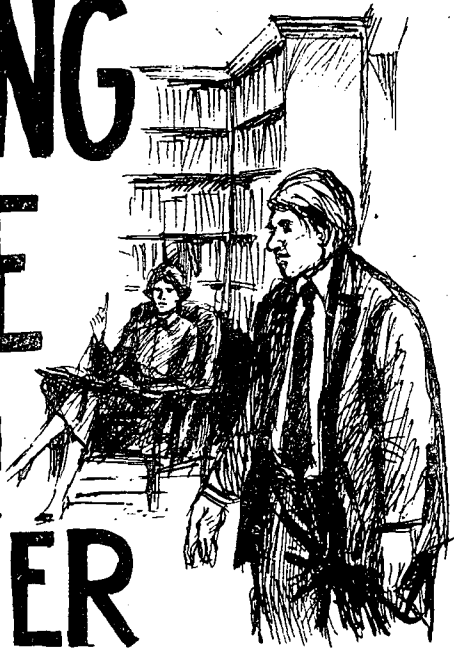
Irving Bernstein, Art Director



Wilf threatened to reveal a twenty-year-old crime . . .

# NOTHING TO LOSE

by  
**WILLIAM  
BANKIER**



**T**he *Herald* was out of business. *The Star*, once bitten, was shy of rehiring this particular drunk. *The Gazette* already employed two of the best theater reporters in Montreal. There was nothing left for Wilf Harrison to do but approach that villain Santer at *The Post*. After forty minutes in the waiting room, his morale was as low as it had ever been. But there was no other place to go.

"Mr. Santer will see you now."

NOTHING TO LOSE

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Harrison got up at the second try. The chair was so close to the floor it was impossible for a 260-pound man to rise with dignity. "Thanks very much." He smiled shyly at the girl as he headed for the inner office, but she was watching his unshined shoes. Never mind. If she'd looked at his head he would have been regretting the overdue haircut.

Santer stayed behind his desk moving papers. "Come in, Wilf. Sit you down. Nice to see you." A glance, a troubled smile, this letter goes here, that file goes there—Gib Santer was a busy man stealing a few minutes, no more, to do a failed journalist the courtesies.

"Good of you to take the time, Gib."

"Listen, I'm glad to do it. What's the story?"

"I need a job—to make it brief."

"Then that's some other editor's good luck. A writer like Wilf Harrison on the loose, you'll be snapped up in no time." The girl stuck her head in the doorway and started to say "Coffee," but stopped and went away when Santer shook his head. "I appreciate your giving *The Post* a shot, Wilf, but we took on two people in the Spring and the chairman is still complaining. He wants me to trim."

Harrison felt mild relief. He would not have to work for this cynical, hypocritical, mealy-mouthed, fat-faced liar sitting there pretending he was not aware that Wilf had tried every editor in town and was reduced to Santer as a last resort. Still, the refusal confirmed his trouble. He was not willing to spend another night under the same roof with Emma. His savings were less than five hundred dollars. He needed a job.

"It seems to be the same story all over," Harrison said.

"You don't have to worry." Santer picked up his telephone and dialed three digits. He waited, frowning at Harrison's shoulder. Harrison had seen the dandruff in the elevator mirror but there was no use brushing it off—it only came back.

"Gary?" Santer said into the phone. "Come in here, will you? It's about the tax story, what do you think it's about?" He put down the phone and dropped his peevish voice. "You don't have a thing to worry about. Keith Harrison's big brother? Jump on a plane to New York, look up Keith, he'll have you working for one of the tabloids within a week. Montreal's loss will be Gotham's gain."

Gotham. Seeing Santer was worth the agony just to hear his preposterous language. If the interview continued, Harrison wondered, would he be given Bagdad-on-the-Subway and The Big Apple? Still, Santer's



desire to get Harrison out of his office and out of Montreal served a purpose. It raised the question—should he or should he not go and ask Keith to help him? Certainly Harrison had helped Keith in the past. How about that night on the mountain after the Playhouse closed?

“Good suggestion, Gib,” he said. “I’ve been considering moving to New York for quite a while. The only reason I’ve hung on in Montreal is because you don’t like to leave your mother alone in a big empty house.”

Santer looked past Harrison to the door. “Don’t run and hide, Gary; we’ve just finished. Is that the rewrite? Stay, I want to discuss it. Wilf, thanks for coming in. Keep in touch. Tell Keith I saw the Arthur Miller revival. Your brother is some director.”

Harrison wandered off the blazing street into the cool interior of The Rainbow. He chose a table where the peanut bowl was full. He sat down and ordered two beers. Why didn’t the clubs serve beer in quart bottles like taverns? But the taverns were hot and they stank and old men spat on the floor. And there were no free peanuts. Crazy. Harrison could buy a sack of peanuts for fifty cents—and even *he* could afford fifty cents. But he came in here and paid club prices just so he could eat free peanuts.

Visiting Keith was a good idea. He would leave this afternoon. Not on a plane; Harrison’s blood pressure had given him a message about planes. He would go down to the Provincial Transport terminus and jump aboard a Greyhound. Keith would be surprised to see him. He might even be pleased.

Harrison signaled for two more beers. The waiter brought them along with another bowl of peanuts.

The early life had been fairly good for Wilf and Keith. There was a certain amount of getting on each other’s nerves but probably no more than most brothers separated by less than two years. A never-ending bind was Keith’s habit of wearing Wilf’s clothes, his jewelry, even borrowing his watch. But that was all in the past now. The secret of family harmony, Harrison decided, had been to keep one brother in New York and the other in Montreal. However, it was time for a reunion.

Emma was scribbling away when Wilf arrived home at the big old house on Côte des Neiges. He entered the library unsteadily, waited near the door. She did not raise her head from the board across her lap

or the pages on it. "The sound of drunken breathing," she said.

Harrison approached her armchair, lifted a page of manuscript, and glanced at it. It was boring stuff, of no interest to anybody except the author. He set the page down without comment. The final argument about her work-in-progress had taken place last night. Emma believed her three-act tragedy would open one day on Broadway, directed by her genius son, Keith Harrison. She was wrong, but Wilf was tired of telling her.

"If you can stay sober long enough to find and hold a job," she had promised him last night, "you can review my opening."

Now he announced, "I'm checking out."

She was not pleased that he had made up his mind. "You've no place to go. No money."

"I'm going to look up Keith."

"Why should he help you when you can't help yourself?"

"We've always helped each other."

Harrison was remembering the night on the mountain when he followed his panic-stricken brother through the woods to the place where Ricky lay in dried leaves, half naked, dead. Keith had asked Wilf what they were going to do. And Wilf had taken over, had done most of the dirty work himself.

"All I need," he told his mother, "is for Keith to point me in the right direction. New York can be a new start."

"New York will eat *you* alive," Emma Harrison said, preparing to do without her son for a week or however long it would take him to dissipate this hope.

The bus braked to a stop in the Port Authority Terminal. Harrison got out and gave a dollar to the man hauling bags from the luggage bay. He carried his suitcase to the street, feeling remarkably loose and relaxed after four hundred miles on the road with only the one rest stop at Saratoga Springs.

It was after ten o'clock. The hotel he had telephoned for a reservation was on Forty-seventh Street. His plan had been to walk, but the desperate appearance of the people loitering outside the terminal changed his mind. He hailed a taxi.

His hotel-room window looked out on the pink-stucco façade of a restaurant doing good business. Harrison drew up a chair and sat at the

window with a glass and a bottle of bourbon. He considered calling Keith but decided to wait until the morning. It was awkward enough to have come without notice. Better not aggravate things by telephoning at eleven at night.

The bottle was two-thirds empty when he lay down after midnight. New York was some fascinating city. New York felt just fine. The smells, the sirens, the menacing citizens, and the tanned cops in pairs with those gun butts at the hip. Harrison felt as if this could be the situation he had been looking for.

At ten-thirty in the morning, shaved and wearing a clean shirt, he walked into Keith's office on the twenty-second floor of a magnificent building. Keith met him with open arms, literally. Harrison was not prepared for the welcome. He had to turn to the window and admire the view while he got his handkerchief out and made a production of blowing his nose.

"Wilf, you did it! I never thought we'd lure you down here. Where are you staying?" When Harrison told him, Keith said, "That's a terrible place. Let me put you onto something better. I'd have you up to the apartment but I'm in the process of shedding Caroline and there's this young creature from Andorra staying with me. The pair of us in only three rooms."

"I'll be O.K. where I am."

"Sit down, Wilf. Coffee? Or a drink? Hell, it's late enough, let's have a drink."

"If you are, Keefer. Why not?"

"So. Right. There we are—cheers. Now, where are you going to be working?" Keith flashed perfect teeth in a handsome middle-aged face. "It'll be a relief to have *one* friendly critic in this belligerent city."

"I'm not. I haven't got a job."

The pause lasted less than a second. "But when you phoned you said you were here to work."

"If you can get me something." Harrison regretted his next statement the moment the words passed his lips. "All I need is a chance, Keith."

"You don't have to sell yourself to me, Wilf. But journalism in New York is a competitive situation. They've been closing newspapers here. Every street corner has a couple of experienced writers on it."

"I certainly don't want to end up on a street corner."

Keith finished his drink and went to the bar. He set his glass beside the bottle and stood staring down at polished chrome. "You can't just blow into New York and hope to make it. Not at—"

"My age?"

"It isn't fair to you or me or anybody. How much money have you got?"

"Four hundred dollars and change."

"God help us."

"I'll accept help from anybody," Harrison said.

The brothers talked in a tone that sounded like argument to the secretary outside the door. When they burst through on their way to a lunch neither of them wanted, they were white-faced and silent.

In the restaurant, Keith put aside his menu after ordering and said, "You've got to go back, Wilf. At least in Montreal you've got a home."

"I'm never going back, Keefer," Harrison said. The drinks had topped him up. "I'm committed to this move."

"It won't work. I doubt if you could land a job on a New York newspaper in—a year, for goodness' sake. I can lend you a couple of hundred but you'll have to start earning. And there are no jobs!"

"I don't believe you."

"Believe me!"

"You haven't even tried yet. You're an influential man in the legitimate theater. You know people. Some of them must know editors. Make some telephone calls, Keefer, before you tell me there's no hope."

Keith sighed and turned his head while the waiter set plates in front of them. When they were alone again, he said, "Yes. I could make some phone calls. But *you* would have to attend the job interview."

Harrison stopped the fork halfway to his mouth. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Keith raised his eyebrows, committed now to this crusade no matter how much damage it might do. "You don't look very impressive. You don't sound very impressive. Frankly, you come across as an overweight man who drinks. And the fact you used to work for a couple of Montreal newspapers is not going to cut any ice."

"You bastard."

"I'm saying it for your own good. If you get a grip on yourself, you can change. Lose weight, go off the booze, shape up—"

"And you can dig yourself a hole on the side of Mount Royal and crawl into it! Along with your friend Ricky!" Harrison surprised himself by saying this. Until now, he had not been aware his trip to New York was for the purpose of threatening his brother. Now he understood what was happening. He had come to blackmail Keith into getting him a job.

"You must be joking," Keith said.

"How long has it been?" Harrison said. "Twenty years? I remember it like last weekend. It was closing night, the last performance of the season. Everybody had gone to the party except me. I stayed behind to lock up—stage manager's responsibility."

"You've turned into a boring man, Wilf."

"Hear what I intend to do. You won't be bored." Harrison went on talking about that September night at the Mountain Playhouse. The summer theater was no longer there but Ricky must be exactly where they had buried her. She had been a pretty girl, the sort who comes out of nowhere to apprentice for little money. The men were attracted until they learned she was only fifteen—jail bait. Only Keith Harrison pursued her despite the risk.

"It was an accident with Ricky," Keith said, sounding undisturbed. "That's why you helped me."

"Helped you, that's right. You were in trouble and I helped you." A tease to the end, the girl had gone along with Keith for a late walk in the woods. She let him go partway, then tried to stop him, but it was too late. He smothered her cries and hurt her enough to prevent her struggling. Afterwards she crawled away, getting set to run in her mauled condition, threatening to tell on him. Keith only wanted to stop her till she cooled down, but when he caught her ankle she fell and struck her head on a rock.

"The time to plead accident was then and there," Harrison concluded. "But we buried her."

"Let me read your mind," Keith said. "You intend to tell the police unless I find you a job. Well, good luck, Wilf. There'll be nothing but bones in the ground—and your word against mine."

Harrison shook his head. "More than bones," he said. "Remember the stone pendant with your initials carved on it? I made it after we came back from Nova Scotia with those rocks we found on the beach at Parrsboro. I gave it to you for your birthday."

Now Keith remembered. "I *was* wearing a pendant that night. She

grabbed it, it was in her hand—”

“You were afraid to touch her. I said I’d look after it. We got shovels from the theater and dug a hole in the hollow below Lookout Rock. It was when we were putting her in the ground that you saw the pendant. I sent you back to get washed while I finished up.”

“And now you’re saying you didn’t take the pendant. It’s buried with her.”

“That’s right. I couldn’t open her hand. I didn’t see what difference it would make, so I left it.” Harrison could feel his confidence growing. “And I was right. Ricky was a drifter. There was only a casual inquiry—she could have gone anywhere.”

Keith gave the waiter a credit card. Waiting for his receipt, he said, “You aren’t this crazy, Wilf. You’ll go to jail too. Accessory after the fact.”

“True as hell, Keefer. But I have nothing to lose.”

Keith told his brother to ring the office after six. He would think about the situation. Harrison walked the streets, looking at himself in plate-glass windows, taking a beer here, a beer there in little bars, each with its own character, its own afternoon hangers-on. He was falling more in love with New York by the minute. Keith would see reason. He would have to. A job would materialize and Harrison would be off and running.

No nonsense this time. Keith’s advice, cruel though it sounded, was worthwhile. Harrison would take off some weight and moderate his drinking. It would be easier to discipline himself in new surroundings with new friends, new goals.

At six he telephoned Keith’s office and was put through. There was a new tone in his brother’s voice, brusque and businesslike. “No deal, Wilf. My advice to you is to forget this blackmail. You’ll only hurt yourself, take my word for it.”

“I’ll hurt you more.”

“Go home. I telephoned Emma this afternoon. She says you’ve been acting strangely but she forgives you—you’re welcome to pick up where you left off.”

“She forgives me? She forgives *me*? I’m the one who’d be crazy to forgive the pair of *you*! And I won’t! I’ll bring you down, Keith, I swear it! And that’ll be the end of Emma’s idiotic play, you can tell her that for me!”

“Tell her yourself. Go home and tell her yourself.” This was the ar-

rogant, taunting voice from childhood used whenever Keith had somehow gained the upper hand.

"Your little roommate from Andorra," Harrison countered, breathing hard in the cramped telephone booth. "How old is she? Fifteen?"

"Sixteen next birthday," Keith said. "But people don't seem to worry as much these days." Then, briskly, as if he had just remembered: "Oh, by the way, here's a tip. Find yourself a good shampoo, why don't you? That dandruff is looking terminal."

Harrison slept on and off during the bus ride back to Montreal. He came aboard well tanked on beer and whisky and the boilermakers kept him in a fantasy world for most of the trip. He remembered things like the way Keith used to come charging at him along the back porch on a rainy afternoon, propelling a flat wooden doll with hinged legs and a stick in its back, screaming "Charge of the Light Brigade!" and returning time and again until Harrison's arms were so weak from flailing at his brother he could not swing another blow. Nobody was hurt and they ended up on the floor, crying with laughter.

The hinge-legged doll was somewhere around. Probably in Harrison's bedroom cupboard. He kept a hundredweight of junk in there—the box of polished stones from Parrsboro, the Coca-Cola bottle he collected at the factory when the gang went around with coupons clipped from the newspaper to get their free Coke and free hat. His sets of hockey cards were there under the dust, packs of them in elastic bands, old photos of players like Syl Apps and Turk Broda with shiny hair parted in the middle. Nothing was ever thrown away. He even had sacks of cruddy milk-bottle caps collected in a competition to win a bicycle and then never turned in.

The bus rolled across the Champlain Bridge and Harrison was almost home. He stared blearily at the illuminated Cross on the mountain. Lord help me, he thought, it can't be that far from where we buried Ricky.

He telephoned the police from a bank of phones in the terminus before his determination could fade. One scornful word from Emma and he might capitulate—or else give the cops a fresher killing to investigate.

He talked to a detective, refusing to identify himself, giving details of the missing girl, telling how they would find a pendant with the initials of the killer carved on it, a man named Harrison of a certain prominent



address on Côte des Neiges. He described exactly where to dig—a couple of yards below Lookout Rock, not far from where the Mountain Playhouse used to operate. The detective was taking notes, probing, encouraging the caller to give his name.

Harrison rang off and took a taxi home. His mother was writing as usual, or pretending to.

"Now you're really wasting your time," he said. "I've just been talking to the police. I've told them where to find the body of a girl Keith raped and killed twenty years ago."

She remained calm. "I know. Keith telephoned from New York. Just after you threatened him. He told me all about it."

"Then he's madder than I thought."

"You're the crazy one," Emma said. "You could have been all right if you'd kept your mouth shut. Now you'll be put away."

"So will Keith. For a lot longer than I will."

"We'll see." She sounded matter-of-fact.

Harrison stood behind her chair, looking over her shoulder at the baize-covered board across her knees, at the scribbled sheets of paper. "No future in that," he said.

"You're the one with no future," she said. Then she added, "Thank goodness I had one decent child. My last was my best."

Harrison went upstairs, counting the brass carpet rods on the way. Inside his room he sensed something was different. The cupboard door had been opened and not properly closed—it always stuck and had to be kicked shut at the bottom. He went to it and opened it, smelling old leather and mildewed paper. He pulled the string that turned on the naked bulb on the side wall.

Things had definitely been moved. On top of everything was the cigar box containing the Parrsboro polished stones. He took the box to his bed, sat down and opened it, and spilled out the contents. A gold chain hissed onto the bedspread attached to a chunk of carved quartz.

Now Harrison knew what had happened. He knew exactly what had happened twenty years ago, and earlier today when Keith telephoned Emma from New York. It explained Keith's arrogance on the phone, and Emma's satisfaction.

He had made two pendants all those years ago, one with Keith's initials, one with his own. How could he have forgotten? Keith had obviously remembered and sent Emma up to the cupboard to confirm his recol-

lection. Typically, the younger brother was always mislaying his pendant. When he could not lay his hand on it he grabbed Wilf's, and wore it as casually as a borrowed necktie or a belt.

Harrison turned over the stone and examined the initials. K.H. It was Keith's pendant. The one in the grave—the one clutched in what remained of Ricky's hand—would be his own.

Harrison stretched out and closed his eyes. He thought he'd only napped; but when he awoke the room was filled with sunlight. There was a sound in the front hall downstairs. His mother was answering the door. Harrison heard a masculine voice and picked out the words, "Police officer," and, "The caller gave us this address."

Emma said something and then, after a pause, he heard footsteps on the stairs.

He turned his face to the wall. In frames above him were all his favorite photographs. His eye fell on the picture of Keith at a high-school track-and-field meet, caught in mid-air as he cleared the high-jump bar with perfect form. In the background, several students were watching. Wilf sought and found himself. He was standing there, shockingly thin, a pale teenager holding a tape measure, and even at this distance he could make out the envious smile on his face.

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*Chisolm had been fired from seven jobs in the past month . . .*

# THE GAME AS IT IS PLAYED

by  
**HENRY  
SLESAR**



"Mrs. Gibbons," Hackley said in the knife-edge voice he reserved for grim business situations. Mrs. Gibbons, a young woman of pleasing contour and melting eyes, gathered her steno pad, her pencil, and her poise, and went into his office. The agency people were already there, four dead-white faces over dead-white shirtfronts. She looked straight ahead, but she had the feeling that if she looked up, there would be sooty black clouds on the ceiling, generated by presidential anger.

"Go ahead, damn it," Hackley said, death-ray eyes on the whitest face of all. "Say it slow, Fanshaw, so's my girl can take it all down. Mrs. Gibbons! You listening?"

She nodded, flipped steno-pad cover, aimed pencil point. The one named Fanshaw (wasn't the agency *called* Fanshaw?) began to talk in a monotone, and she began to transcribe.

". . . No idea when the girl was hired . . . Seemed like a perfectly decent, sober girl . . . Mr. Hackley, believe me, if—"

"Hold it, *hold it!*" Hackley slammed a palm on the desk, a palm toughened on that same surface. "So the girl fooled you? So she looked like Little Orphan Annie, but she was really a foul-mouthed drunk? You think *that* explains it?"

"You see, Mr. Hackley—"

"You think *that's* any reason for allowing a brazen *street* woman to appear in a Hackley Company commercial? Holding up *my* deodorant swabs and saying those filthy words on *television*?"

"If you'll just let me explain—"

"I spend three million commissionable dollars, Fanshaw—can your agency *afford* the loss of my billing?"

"Mr. Hackley, you *know* how much we value your business, and if I can just—"

"You can just tell me one thing!" Hackley bellowed. "Why was the commercial *live*? Why wasn't it *taped*? You could have avoided all this trouble by taping it!"

"That's exactly the point," the agency head said desperately. "You see, the broadcast itself being live, Mr. Chisolm thought—"

"Who?"

"Mr. Chisolm," Fanshaw repeated, glancing sheepishly at the fourth chair. "Our assistant TV director."

For the first time, Mrs. Gibbons became aware that one of the white faces differed from the rest. It was younger, better organized of feature, and with less involved eyes. The eyes met Mr. Fanshaw's and then slid, rather coolly, over to Hackley.

"That's right," he said. "It was all my idea. I thought we'd get a better bridge from the live action if we had a girl in the studio. I didn't ask anybody. I just did it."

Hackley swelled up as if a bicycle pump was at work under the desk.

"You?" he said. "Did that? Without asking anybody?"

"Yes, sir," the young man said.

"And what am I supposed to do?" Hackley said, red from clavicle to widow's peak. "Applaud your honesty? Admire your candor? Fanshaw! Is that what you really expected?"

"No, sir," Fanshaw said. "I just thought—"

"You thought what? That I'd forgive and forget? If that man"—even the finger he wagged at Chisolm seemed swollen with rage—"if that *idiot* worked for me, you know what I'd do? I'd boot him out of here! Right this minute!"

Fanshaw swallowed, and Mrs. Gibbons' heart fluttered as she watched the TV director's expressionless face. Then Fanshaw said, "I'm sorry, Bill. Mr. Hackley's absolutely right. There's no excuse for what you did. None at all. I'm afraid you've had it."

"You mean I'm canned?"

"I'm sorry."

Chisolm stood up. Oddly enough, he looked directly at Mrs. Gibbons and gave her a brave wink. Then he squared his shoulders and silently left the room. Mrs. Gibbons, saddened, looked down at the scrawl of Pitman on her steno pad.

"Well now," Hackley resumed, the knife edge gone from his voice. "What else do we have on the agenda, gentlemen?"

At noontime, Mrs. Gibbons adjourned to a homey little cafeteria down the street. At a small table in the rear, hunched over a bowl of soup, she saw young Chisolm. Alone, communing with his appetite, all his bravado seemed to have deserted him. On an impulse, she sat down in the opposite chair.

"Hello," she said.

He looked up, blankly at first, and then with a smile that could have been either recognition or admiration.

"I'm Frances Gibbons," she said. "Mr. Hackley's secretary."

"Oh, yes," Chisolm answered. "I saw you at the execution. That's quite a boss you have, Miss Gibbons."

"It's *Mrs.*," she said.

"A genuine fire-eater. How do you put up with him?"

"I've only been there two weeks. He hasn't treated me badly."

She watched him scrape the bowl.

"Are you married?" she asked gently. "Any family?"

"No," he said.

"Frankly, I felt just awful about what happened. I've never seen anybody fired before."

"Don't let it bother you."

"It bothered me quite a lot. I didn't think it was—fair. If you ask me, that boss of yours isn't much better than Mr. Hackley."

"Forget it," Chisolm said.

"I thought about it all morning," Mrs. Gibbons persisted. "I felt absolutely terrible."

His glance came up from the plate, and this time his look was one of long examination. She began to change color under it. The extra tinting heightened the pretty effect of her red mouth and sea-green eyes.

"You know something?" he said. "I think I can trust you. I think I can tell you the truth."

"The truth?"

He smiled. "I was fired last week too. I'll be fired again this week. I've been fired from seven jobs this past month."

Mrs. Gibbons gasped. "*Seven* jobs? In a month?"

"Sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?"

"It sounds *terrible*. How can you make so many mistakes?"

"You don't understand," Chisolm said. "I was *hired* to be fired. That's my business. Professional scapegoat."

"A *what* goat?"

"Companies hire me whenever they want to fire somebody publicly. To make up for some goof or other. Or to satisfy somebody's perverted sense of justice. I've taken the blame for every kind of error or stupidity you can think of."

"You're not serious? You do this for a *living*?"

"Among other things," Chisolm said agreeably. "I do a little modeling on occasion—raincoats and stuff. Some radio announcing when it comes my way. Anyway, this sideline keeps me in clam chowder. Fifty bucks a day and expenses. Not bad, eh?"

Mrs. Gibbons wanted to laugh, but she was too eager to learn more. "So you *don't* work for the ad agency?"

"Never did. Don't ask *me* who hired that drunk for the commercial. Maybe Fanshaw did it himself."

"So you're a—stand-in? A substitute?"

"Right. I get a lot of jobs from ad agencies. Some assignments come

from divisions of big companies. When they have to answer to headquarters for some foul-up, I'm the guy they blame. Nobody ever bothers to check to see if I'm a legitimate employee. They're just happy to know somebody's head landed in the basket." He chuckled. "Once I ran into a tricky problem at a steel company. After I was bounced, the union rep stopped me and wanted to call a strike if I didn't get reinstated. I had to talk fast to get out of *that* one."

"I've never heard of such a thing!" Mrs. Gibbons said wonderingly. "It's like some crazy game! Pretending to be someone you aren't!"

"It's an important function," Chisolm said, tearing into a roll. "Just think how useful scapegoats are. The world is full of them. I just put the job on a paying basis."

Mrs. Gibbons nodded thoughtfully. "You may be right," she said. Then she looked into his grey eyes and laughed, a little vulgarly. "You're a wicked man, Chisolm!"

"Call me Bill," he said, marveling at the prettiness of her mouth.

"And what will you be doing the rest of the day, Bill Chisolm? Getting fired again?"

"Mrs. Gibbons," he said lightly, "I don't have a single thing to do."

They met at a cocktail lounge called Pedro's at 5:30. During the third round, Mrs. Gibbons confessed that she was in no hurry. Her husband, who traveled a great deal, was in St. Louis at the moment, and all she could look forward to was a solitary meal. Chisolm wouldn't hear of it. He bought her a steak. The effect of all that protein undid the happy work of the martinis, and so she suggested they try to recapture the glow at her apartment.

It took half a bottle of Scotch to provide the desired effect, but long before they ran out of whisky they ran out of small talk. There was only one alternative. She showed him where the bedroom was. It was a warm, well equipped room, a description that suited Mrs. Gibbons as well.

When he heard the sound of a turning knob, Chisolm pried open an eye and tried to make out the distorted silhouette in the doorway. Mrs. Gibbons had already done so, judging from her cry of terror.

"*Maurice!*" she cried. "Oh, my God, Maurice, don't be crazy! Don't!"

Now Chisolm saw why the figure was distorted. Its right arm was longer—by a revolver's length.

"I knew there was someone!" he shouted. "I knew it all along!" Then



he fired the gun point-blank, striking Chisolm in the chest and killing him at once. Mrs. Gibbons screamed, but was glad to see that her husband's vengeance was spent. He sat down on the edge of the bed, like a child awaiting punishment, and allowed her to call the police.

The following night, she met Eugene at the same old place and told him the good news.

"Sure, great," Eugene growled, in that rough baritone she loved so much. "Only—I still don't understand about this guy Chisolm."

Mrs. Gibbons laughed and said, "Silly!" Then she explained that it was strictly a professional service, one for which, unfortunately, the stand-in had died before being paid.

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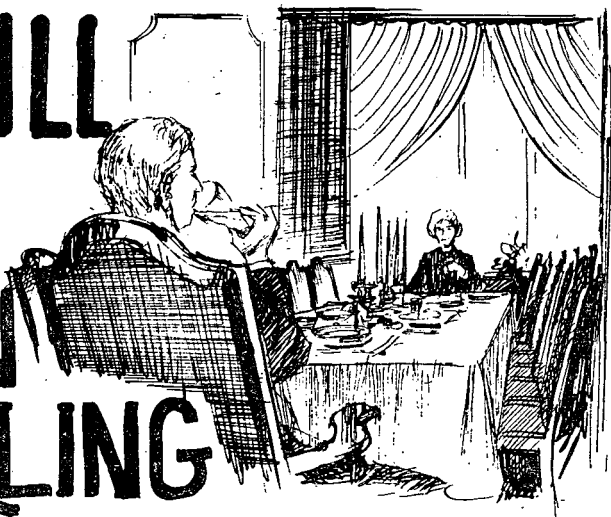
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*The Boltons hadn't been on speaking terms for years . . .*

# WHERE THERE'S A WILL

by  
**JEAN  
DARLING**



Until that certain day in May 1975, the Boltons hadn't been on speaking terms for years. Countless times a week brother would pass sister on the street or on the way in and out of the house they shared with their mother, but neither word nor glance ever betrayed any relationship between the two.

At first neighbors had watched their to-ing and fro-ing from behind curtained windows, speculating on what twist of fate could have so es-

tranged the pair. But now the old siblings moved unnoticed through the wrongly hung gate that scraped outward over the sidewalk. It was one of the things Terry Bolton had repaired "bass ackwards," as his sister Catherine had remarked back when they were still on speaking terms, before their stepfather died, leaving the high Georgian house to their mother, Mrs. Bolton-Hughes, as she called herself. (The hyphen insinuated between the two married names catapulted her several notches above her parents' working-class background—until she opened her mouth and let escape the Ballymun accent.)

A twenty-foot lawn straggled its way between the sidewalk and the house that centered a row of nine lining the south side of a small enclosed square. Inside, a wide staircase led up to long-disused rooms crowded with gee-gaws and furniture dating from as far back as Queen Anne. Drawn curtains and closed doors shielded the scurrying mouse and rat. Spiderwebs festooned dust-laden treasures that would boggle an auctioneer's eyes and drive an American tourist wild with delight. Both upper stories had lain fallow since the day Mrs. Bolton-Hughes, then in her eighty-fifth year, had been moved down to the ground-floor room behind Catherine's. Terry, in turn, had dropped from his attic aerie to the box room on the landing directly above his mother. From then on Terry and Catherine had shared the kitchen, fighting over who would fill the hot-water bottle, stoke the coal fire, and fix their mother's meals—all without exchanging a single word.

Every now and again during these years the old girl would escape to the nearest pub where the regulars would stand the spry octogenarian to a shot or two of Irish. While the old woman chattered away, one of the lads would keep watch. When Cathy or her brother came into view, the bartender would spirit Old Mae out the back and the chase would be on. Hopping and scrambling, skinny Mrs. Bolton-Hughes would dart into one pub after another with her spawn in hot pursuit. On and on she would career until, tired and a bit tiddly, she was captured and returned to her bed of abstinence. There, ringed by hot-water bottles, Old Mae grew feeble under the watchful care of her children, each of whom sought to oust the other from favor.

Without the occasional romp to the pub to fire an interest in life, the old lady began to fail. She refused to get up to dine with her elderly children as they ate their separately prepared meals. And so they faced each other in silence from either end of the twelve-seater table, listening

for the slightest murmur from the bottle-warmed nest in the great brass bed, listening for the rattle that would announce the day of deliverance had arrived.

Like a thermometer, the old woman's age rose—95, 96, 97—and still she lived. Closed into their separate rooms, the Boltons began to despair of her ever dying. Cathy trembled in her bed, filled with fears that she would predecease her mother, that the grave would swallow her whole—untraveled, unwed, unmissed. This last was the most terrible, the thought that when she died not a single tear would fall. Terry, in the tiny room above, was suffering in his own fashion. Life was fast running away from the man whose continual state of indecision had kept him at a standstill since leaving Trinity College fifty years before.

Then, that May morning dawned when neither of them bothered to listen for sounds that might come from the big brass bed. Both knew for certain that nothing but silence reigned in their mother's coal-fire-heated room. Independently inspired, each had picked the same night to still the fragile life cocooned in the ground-floor room that faced the long-forgotten back garden. Cathy, the more squeamish of the two, had chosen warm milk fortified by a toxic helping of her mother's prescribed sleeping potion. Terry had crept down a few hours later to snuff out her life with a pillow.

"Mother's sleeping late this morning," Terry said—his first words to his sister in years.

"She is," Cathy answered complacently. Then, noting her brother's raised eyebrow, she added, "Ah, let her sleep a while longer, the rest will do her good."

The elderly siblings tapped the tops off their soft-boiled eggs with knives, poured tea out of individual pots, stirred in milk and sugar.

"Would you like toast?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, please," Terry answered, and offered her some of his black-cherry jam. Yet, though the conversational barrier had crumbled, there still was an undercurrent of rivalry. Each wanted to be first to discover the body, thus foisting blame for the death on the other should any question arise. At last, by tacit agreement, the two rose and, as though joined at the hip, squeezed through the door into their mother's room.

The old woman lay with one hand over the covers, her thin white hair straggling across the pillow. Her eyes were closed and her face looked

almost youthful.

"Mother, wake up, love," Catherine said, opening the curtains.

"Yes, Mother dear, wakey, wakey—rise and shine," Terry said, patting her feet as he did every morning. Catherine stirred the fire and added a shovelful of coal.

"I'll top up her bottles." Terry reached under the covers.

And that was how her children discovered Old Mae had slipped away in her sleep.

The funeral was quiet, attended by Catherine and Terence only. The old woman's two sisters had emigrated, one to Australia and the other to Canada, and they had lived and died without giving a thought to the baby sister who had remained in Dublin. A single taxi followed the hearse to the burial and left three modest wreaths like buttons down the center of the new grave in Glasnevin Cemetery. One was from Cathy, one was from Terry, and the third was sent by the solicitor who later in the day sat at the end of the dining table, his eyeglasses halfway down his nose, watching the reaction to the portion of the will he had just finished reading.

"She can't do that to me!" shouted Terry, slamming his fist on the table.

"There must be some mistake." Catherine's voice vibrated with indignation. "Mother left everything to me."

"She did not!" Terry contradicted her. "I know her will. Wait, I'll get my copy." He rushed up the stairs two at a time.

"Spry for a man over seventy," Mr. Walsh remarked.

"Mr. Walsh," Cathy said. "I have a copy of my mother's will here." She went to the sideboard and took an envelope out of a drawer and brought it to the solicitor. "You see? It's witnessed and everything."

Terry returned and slapped an envelope similar to Catherine's on the table in front of John Walsh, whose face crinkled into an evil little grin.

"Yes, Mae told me about these. Not worth the paper on which they're written. This here—" he tapped the legal document open on the table before him—"this will, the one I am reading, this is the valid will—signed, sealed, and now almost delivered." He laughed.

"Why would the auld—why would Mother do such a thing to—to us?" Terry asked, moving around the table to stand beside Catherine. For the first time in their lives, brother and sister were united in a single cause.

"Your mother wanted to make sure you didn't leave her. If either of you thought yourself the sole heir it would make it a more difficult decision if one of you decided to marry and live elsewhere. As it was, neither of you did go away. Everything worked out as she wished."

"Here it is! Here!" Cathy exclaimed, pointing to a line in her copy of the will. "Right here it says: 'A suitable bequest will be given to Anthony Byrne.' You see? A *suitable* bequest."

"The house is a suitable bequest for a great-aunt to give her nephew. As you know, Maura and Maureen—née Kelly—your mother's two sisters, emigrated shortly after marrying the Byrne brothers. One settled in Australia, the other in Can—"

"Why are you telling us this?" Terry interrupted. "Surely you'll allow we know our own family history every bit as well as you do."

"Ah, no, Mother wouldn't be so unfair as to leave our house to this Anthony Byrne. A hundred pounds—two hundred even—but not our house. Except for Christmas cards, Maura and Maureen hadn't written Mother in years. And when they died they didn't leave her so much as an old hangnail."

"Cathy's right. Anthony Byrne has no right to the house."

"Our house."

"Our house," Terry corrected.

"What else does the will say, Mr. Walsh?" Catherine asked.

Mr. Walsh went on to read how, should Anthony Byrne predecease his aunt, or should the said Anthony Byrne die without issue, the property would be equally divided between Catherine and Terrence Bolton with the proviso that they both remain in residence. In the event that either or both moved away, the property would be sold and the proceeds given to the Cheshire Homes for the Aged.

"But if Anthony Byrne is still alive, we're cut off. And he's sure to be, he's so young." Catherine began to cry. Terry moved to comfort her.

"Your mother did not cut you off. She left you the furnishings, and they'll bring a small fortune at auction. Plus you have the income from the capital equally divided. Ah, no, sure an' your sainted mother would never let her childer starve!" Mr. Walsh launched into broad stage Irish.

Terry slumped in his chair.

"You must realize Anthony was the name of your brother who died—" Mr. Walsh addressed them both.

"Before we were born!" Cathy exclaimed.

"True. However, your mother never did get over his death and, as she grew older, she dwelt upon his memory." Walsh took off his glasses and put them in his pocket.

"So when will we know about Anthony?" Terence asked.

"Soon. Cablegrams have been sent. We'll find your man, never fear." Walsh's smile was cheerful as he closed his fine black-leather attaché case.

And so the time of waiting began, with the siblings crowding conversation into every moment as though trying to cancel out all the years of silence. Then, one Friday morning, a knock came at the door.

"You must be Cousin Cathy." A fresh-faced young man of twenty-eight or -nine stepped into the hall carrying a suitcase.

At tea that evening his Australian accent definitely grated on the Boltons' ears when he inquired where they intended living after he took over the house.

"We haven't thought—it's all come as such a shock," Catherine murmured, and Byrne was decent enough to let the subject drop.

That was just as well. The following day there was a shock all around when a second Anthony Byrne arrived on the scene, complete with rucksack, guitar, and single earring.

The appearance of a brace of Anthonys called for a meeting of "interested parties" at Mr. Walsh's fusty, cluttered office where, bracketed by Anthonys, Catherine and Terence faced the solicitor.

"According to the will, Anthony Byrne is heir," he said, looking up from the document. "No middle name, no identification of any kind. As the will was drawn in March 1967, after you both were born, your dates of birth would have no bearing on the case. So, as far as I can see, the solution is to turn the estate over to an auctioneer and divide the proceeds from the sale between you."

"No," the Australian said flatly.

"No way, man," the Canadian agreed.

"Well then, that's it—until further investigations can be made."

"Like what?"

"And us? What about us?" Cathy asked, her hand on Terry's arm.

"You are free to continue in residence for the time being." Walsh crossed to the door. "The situation is complicated, and seeing that the gentlemen won't come to an agreement we'll just have to wait and see



what new information can be unearthed. I'll be in touch," he said, ushering them out.

Heartened by the reprieve, the siblings set their minds to the task of finding some way to fan the tiny spark of hope into a permanent glow. Night after night they explored the problem from all angles. Night after night they reached the same conclusion—only one solution was acceptable. Somehow the Anthonys had to be eliminated.

But with this decision came almost insurmountable difficulties. These were two vital young men they contemplated removing, not an ancient woman already well on the way to dying. And, of course, their ends would have to be accomplished without the faintest shadow of suspicion falling on either Terry or Catherine. No method sprang readily to mind and the Anthonys' fate was held in abeyance—until one afternoon when, bereft of some earth-shattering catastrophe, the newspaper headlined what promised to resolve their predicament quite satisfactorily:

#### BODY FOUND IN GRAND CANAL

Below the black scarehead the reporter concluded his news story with a call for prompt completion of the filling in of the leg of the Grand Canal that once had serviced the Guinness Brewery. As the "ditch" was now, the mud was a hazard to children in particular. He went on to say that if the corporation didn't attend to the job immediately there would be a Mothers' Protest March on Leinster House.

Three days later, the aggravation caused by the Byrnes was past tense. The next move lay in the hands of the Coroner. Once again a lone taxi found its way to Glasnevin Cemetery following three new additions to the community. The first coffin was lowered beside Mae Bolton-Hughes, one of her children having lacked the stamina necessary to withstand any extraordinary strain. Both the other coffins were interred a discreet distance away, there having been no clamor for the return of either occupant to some necropolis in his native land.

The high Georgian house facing the enclosed square was a lonely place now, without the plotting, the animosity, and the striving for possession. All that was over, even the police investigations, and the house still remained in Bolton hands.

The Coroner's verdict was murder and death by misadventure. "Murder inspired by greed," he said. "A heinous crime, one cousin murdering another to gain possession of a house. The subsequent demise of the murderer was caused by lack of footing on the canal bank which caused him to fall and strike his head on the rocks below." Which, in a way was exactly what had happened.

A few drinks during a private midnight conversation had convinced the Australian that Tony, as his cousin preferred to be called, would be better off dead. He epitomized everything Anthony despised. The Canadian was a dropout with scarred wrists who bragged of the times he had been rescued from the brink of self-inflicted death. "Certainly a man like that would be better off dead," Terry said, topping up their glasses. And so it was agreed with a handshake that, as soon as the formalities were out of the way, there would be no question of the Boltons ever having to leave their home.

The following night the plan was put into action. Lulled by a nightcap of stout and Irish enriched with a dollop of Mrs. Bolton-Hughes' sleeping draught, Tony was unfastened from his guitar and bundled into the back of Anthony's recently purchased Toyota. A five-minute run through traffic-free streets brought them to the Grand Canal, where the two men deposited Tony face down in the rocky sludge of the unfilled ditch. It was at this point, as the men caught their breath while contemplating their handiwork, that Cathy crept up behind them to slam a stone against the back of Anthony's head with all her might. Terry caught him as he slumped and together the siblings assisted him over the side to rest face up beside his cousin.

Leaving the sedan where it stood, the Boltons climbed into Cathy's Volkswagen and drove quickly through the sleeping city to the service station where the car had been left earlier that day for an overhaul, and found their way home on foot.

It was twenty past three. The whole exercise had taken less than a half an hour.

Four hours later one of the siblings lay dying of a massive heart attack while the other slept dreamlessly unaware.

But now that the brouhaha was over, certain decisions had to be made. It would be foolish to consider living on one's own in 1980 with vandals raging through Dublin like a high pollen count. As the lower floor was

more than adequate for single occupancy, it seemed a wise move to convert the upper stories into three self-contained flats.

Cathy toured the house and decided to phone Mr. Walsh for his advice. As she moved toward the phone in the downstairs hallway, the doorbell rang. She turned and went to answer the door.

A young woman stood on the doorstep wearing a rucksack and carrying a guitar. A child clutched her maxi-length skirt at knee level, a sullen look on her tired and dirty face.

After a moment Cathy found her tongue. "Yes?" she said.

"Hi. I'm Sandra—Tony's wife. This here's Bitsie. Tony said to follow him here when we got everything squared away back home." She moved past Cathy into the entry. "Wow, this is some pad!" In passing, the little girl aimed a half-hearted kick at Cathy's shins, but the old woman didn't notice. Her mind was totally engaged in trying to figure out why the possibility that either young Byrne was married had never entered her mind—nor, apparently, Mr. Walsh's.

Now what do I do? she wondered.

Just then a large van with HANDY DANDY REMOVALS emblazoned on its side in fiery red passed in the street. As it rumbled from sight, the adage "Where there's a will there's a way" sprang into her head like a revelation.

"Yes," she said out loud, her spirits suddenly lifting.

"What?" Sandra asked.

"Yes, my dear, come in," Cathy replied, smiling. "You both must be hungry after your long trip." And she led the way down to the kitchen.



*The crowd would be a pickpocket's dream . . .*

# AUCTION AT McKAY'S CORNERS

by  
**ALAN K.  
YOUNG**



**M**y Grandfather McKay died a few minutes past seven on the evening of June 23, 1978. He died at the age of eighty-six, happy in the knowledge that in the 140-odd years in which the McKays had been prominent in the affairs of Pinegrove County there had never, to use his own oft-repeated phrase, been "a blot on the family 'scutcheon.'" No McKay had ever seen the inside of the county jail; no McKay had ever been involved in the sordid goings-on in the county courts; no McKay had ever made

the headlines in the Franklin City *Drum*.

My grandfather died in blessed ignorance of the awful moment that was even then approaching—when, on the day of the auction, for the first time in our family's history, the forbidding words "You're under arrest" would be spoken to a McKay.

And he died, as my grandmother was to remark on that same fateful day six weeks later, "right in the middle of Deuteronomy."

"He passed away reading The Book," said Mr. Bushnell, nodding approvingly. "That musta been a kinda comfort to you, Ma'am."

The three of us were standing under the crabapple tree in the back yard at McKay's Corners, facing the kitchen porch. One of the two young men Mr. Bushnell had brought along from town to help with the auction had just carried out the chair in which Grandfather had rocked away the last hour of his life and set it next to the petunia bed beneath the dining-room bay window. The faded green pillow tied to the seat was beginning to show its stuffing and one of the rungs had come loose, tilting upward at an awkward angle. All the stain had been worn off the arms.

"I still have it in my purse," said Grandma, staring at the chair. "Twenty-four across, I think it was. He had put down 'Deuter,' but that's as far as he got."

"My grandfather was doing a crossword puzzle," I said.

Mr. Bushnell's laugh startled the quiet August morning. "A crossword puzzle? And here I thought he was reading the Bible. 'Right in the middle of Deuteronomy.' That's a good one, that is."

"What does he mean, it's a good one?"

"Nothing, Grandma."

"Mr. McKay's right, Ma'am," said Mr. Bushnell. "I certainly didn't mean no irreverence. I'm sure a crossword puzzle's as good a way to go to glory as any. Matter of fact, I try 'em myself once in a while, but they always ring in them there Egyptian gods on me and my education ain't run along such lines." He glanced at me as if to ask if he had said enough.

The other young man came through the kitchen door, struggling with the headboard of my great-grandmother's mahogany bedstead. He propped it up against the wall of the house, and the sun came through the trellised morning-glory vine at the far end of the porch to stipple red across the black.

The porch and yard were already a welter of household goods—the big oval dining-room table loaded down with china and glassware; my Great-

Uncle Todd's rolltop desk; the ottoman Aunt Beulah Barlow had brought home from Italy piled high with linens; half a dozen of my Great-Aunt Clarissa's still lifes spread out on top of a springs-and-mattress, their gilded plaster frames looking cheap and gaudy in the sunlight. None of it seemed to belong in the sunlight.

Mr. Bushnell fished a blue bandanna out of his right hip pocket and mopped the back of his neck. "It's gonna be a hotter," he said.

"How long do you expect the auction will last?" I asked. I knew that timing would be crucial for Ginny and me today. We were used to working crowds that were either strung out over a long distance like at a parade, or constantly on the move like at a stadium after a game. But an auction crowd, for all its restlessness, would be basically stationary, which meant we'd have to be dead sure of every target before we made a move. Because the slightest rumble and the word would spread and our chance to score would vanish.

"Just about all day, I'm afraid," said Mr. Bushnell, stuffing the bandanna back into his pocket. "'Course, that'll pay off for us in the long run, 'cause what I'll do, see, I'll line up all the really good stuff behind me on the verandah where the folks'll be eyeing it all morning while I knock down the cheap stuff. Then when I do put up the good stuff in the afternoon, half the ladies in the crowd'll have talked themselves into bidding on something they never dreamed of getting when they set out this morning. And believe you me, once two of them gals get their minds set on the same piece they can run it up faster'n a courthouse flag."

"What does he mean—cheap stuff?" said Grandma.

"You know, Ma'am," said Mr. Bushnell. "That rocker, that bureau over there, this here table. Not that they're cheap, mind you, but nowadays people won't pay more'n a few bucks for that kinda stuff unless they's prize antiques. There just ain't no call for 'em. Now that's a beauty of a chamber pot there, but nowadays everyone"—he paused, as though trying to find the end of his sentence among Aunt Gertrude's petunias.

"He's referring," said Grandma, "to your Aunt Beulah Barlow's Wedgwood tureen."

"No, Grandma. The chamber pot there on the end of the table."

"He's not going to sell that?"

"Why not?"

"And wave it around in front of a crowd of strangers? I never heard of such a thing! It's been in our family for years and years."

"It'll bring a few bucks, Ma'am," said Mr. Bushnell. "Some of these antique people go in for that sort of thing. For flowers and such, I suppose."

"Well I don't think he should sell that," said Grandma. "And I don't know about parting with your great-grandmother's bed either. Mother McKay breathed her last in that bed."

"But, Grandma, where in the world would you put it?"

"Now, now, Ma'am," said Mr. Bushnell. "I know it's gonna be hard parting with a lot of things what's hairlooms to you, and beds and bureaus to them what buys 'em. But believe me, Ma'am, money in the bank—that's a hairloom worth having too, and it don't take up near so much room. An old bed in an attic is just an old bed in an attic, but money in the bank is money in the bank."

We were all three silent then, staring at the bed. Somewhere down the County Road toward President's Crossing a dog began to bark, accentuating the quiet of the morning.

Mr. Bushnell took out his bandanna again and mopped his face and the back of his neck. He was a big man with sandy hair and a red face and big freckled hands. He gave the impression of always looking around for an arm to squeeze or a back to slap, and when he was with Grandma his arms just seemed to dangle for want of anything to do. He had on a wilted blue shirt and a wrinkled seersucker suit with a bulge over his left buttock, apparent even through the tail of his jacket, that would tip off even a greenhorn that he was carrying a fat wallet in his left hip pocket.

It was I who had engaged him, driving in to Franklin City a week after Grandfather's funeral and picking his name out of the yellow pages. He had a small dark office on the second floor of the old Homesteaders' Trust Building, with two grimy windows that looked out on Channing's Lumber Yard and, beyond it, the Pimatauning River.

"Can't say as how I've ever known any of the McKays," he'd said when I had explained my mission, "but of course I know *of* 'em. Everyone around these parts does. It'll sure seem a shame to think of that fine big farm sitting out there empty after all these many years."

"I'm afraid my grandmother has no choice," I said. "She's eighty-one now, and we can't just let her stay out there all by herself. I've managed to get her into an apartment here in the city, but it's not very big and she won't be able to take much of the furniture. Of course, there'll be a few things she'll want to keep; McKay's Corners has been her home



ever since she was married, fifty-seven years ago."

"Well, it's gonna be hard on her," said Mr. Bushnell. "But since she does have to part with things what's dear to her, I'll talk her up a good price on all of it. Just you leave it to me. I know these country people around here and I know how to get 'em worked up and rarin' to buy. And I know these antique people too, the tight-fisted buggers, and they know they can't put anything over on Harrison Bushnell."

He paused, and eyed me speculatively. "Would you want I should ring in a shill or two, Mr. McKay?"

"A shill?"

He mistook my surprise for puzzlement. "You know, a couple of boys who'll mosey around through the crowd and join in the bidding. Believe me, Mr. McKay, that's the only way to get these here antique buggers to offer a fair price on anything. Unless of course they get to bidding against themselves, but often as not they get together before the bidding starts and strike up a deal. 'You let me have that there Victorian highboy,' one says to the other, 'and I'll let you have that needlepoint firescreen.' And the trouble is, these here farm wives around here don't never bid on the same things. Most of the ladies wouldn't spit on a brass bed, whereas these last few years the antique people have dang near tripped over themselves at the sight of one. Your grandma got any brass beds?"

"One, but I don't think it's a very good one."

"Don't have to be. I'll talk it up so's they'll think Queen Victoria herself had a snooze in it. Now, how about those shills?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Bushnell. I don't believe my grandmother would approve."

"Just as you say then, Mr. McKay. Even though I work on a percentage basis, I don't do nothing to run up the bidding without the owner gives me the go-ahead. Nothing, that is, but talk it up with all my heart."

He had gone on then to explain the mechanics of the auction: the necessity of getting a state license; the best arrangements for advertising and crowd control; the wisdom of stipulating minimum bids on all the really worthwhile items; the pros and cons of taking out insurance against crowd damage; how everything left unsold at the end of the day could be lumped together and offered for bid to second-hand furniture dealers. But he had left unanswered the one question that was uppermost in my mind, until finally I had to ask it.

"At the auction itself," I said, staring out the grimy window at a Union

Steel sternwheeler pushing a string of coal barges up the river, "I suppose most of the successful bidders pay by check?"

"Don't you believe it. Some of these here farm people show up with a wad of bills big enough to choke a sow tucked away in their overalls; more'n likely fetched out of the mattress or dug up from behind the barn. And even some of these antique buggers likes to pay in cash—pulling something fancy on Uncle Sam is the way I figure that one. But don't you worry none, Mr. McKay. Maybe I sometimes give the truth a little shove when I'm up there describing a piece what's on the block, but not when I'm settling up with them what's hired me. I'll give you an honest reckoning on all of it, so I will—and you'll not find anyone around these parts who'll tell you different."

"I'm sure I won't," I said, and so Mr. Bushnell was hired. And now, five weeks later, he stood beneath the crabapple tree in the back yard at McKay's Corners, wiping the back of his neck with a big blue bandanna and watching Grandma out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, at least I'm going to lay aside your Aunt Millicent's porcelain teapot," she said. "There's no point in letting that go for a few dollars."

"Money in the bank, Ma'am," said Mr. Bushnell. "A few dollars is a few dollars."

"Why don't you go sit down somewhere in the shade, Grandma?" I said. "It's going to be at least another hour before the auction even starts."

"No, I'm going to go and do some weeding in the vegetable garden. I'm afraid the ragweed's gotten in there. I can see some from here."

"But the place could be sold in a couple of weeks!"

"Well, that's not the rhubarb's fault," she said, and moved off toward the garden, pausing halfway across the back yard to stoop and pull some small offending growth from the sea of crab grass. She walked as though her feet were hurting her, the hem of her black dress swinging slowly back and forth above ankles so thin it seemed impossible they could support even so small a woman.

"Now just you let her go and weed," said Mr. Bushnell, laying a fatherly hand on my arm. "It'll take her mind off what she's having to give up. And I think I'd better get in there and see what them fellas is up to."

Mr. Bushnell disappeared into the house and I strolled around to the front yard, where the crowd was beginning to gather. Already there were half a dozen cars in the parking area that Mr. Bushnell's young stalwarts had improvised by ripping out fifty feet of pasture fence, and more were

coming, bouncing their way single file up the rutted lane from the County Road.

It was time, I figured, to make myself scarce. When you're going to work a crowd it's a good idea not to join it until it reaches that magic moment when it becomes big enough to take on a life of its own. It's impossible to say exactly *how* big that is, because it varies from crowd to crowd; you've got to have an instinct for knowing when. Up until that moment, any crowd is still made up of individuals—people still look at one another, faces still register, a loner still stands out. But once it becomes a crowd, a *real* crowd, nobody really looks at anybody any more and it's easy to lose yourself in it. Then if you *do* spot someone looking at you—really *looking*—you can be fairly certain you've been made.

Calling to Grandma that I would be back in half an hour, I started up the orchard hill behind the house. The August sun was well up in the sky by now, and the tan fields, the green woods, the white farm house, and the weather-colored outbuildings had already begun to take on the dry breathless look of an August midday that I remembered so well from my childhood vacations on the farm, when all the world seemed suspended in the heat, when the slightest movement—a butterfly zigzagging down its bumpy unseen path across the meadow, a car raising dust far down the County Road, an ant exploring a blade of grass at my elbow—seemed a miracle of life in a lifeless world.

From the top of the hill a wood ran northeast to the old Partridge place, the nearest neighbor, half a mile away. When I got to the edge of the wood I sat down in the shade of a large old maple from where I could see the farmhouse and its outbuildings below me to the left, and in front of me the County Road, which made a right-angle turn at the entrance to the farm lane and ran away, straight as a die, toward President's Crossing on the Pimatauning three miles distant. Two great hay fields stretched away on either side of the road, and beyond them was Culp's Wood, and beyond the wood more fields, and then another wood, and far in the blue distance the hills of the Pimatauning Valley.

About halfway to President's Crossing, at a small crossroads called Hale's Corners, I could see, thrusting above the trees, the stiff white spire of the Covenant Presbyterian Church, by whose side a century of McKays lay buried. There were my great-grandparents for several generations back, many of their children, and a goodly number of their children's mates. And now there was my grandfather's six-week-old grave.

And all of them spinning like tops, I suspected, over what would be going down at McKay's Corners today. I was sorry now that I'd pressured Ginny into it; her instincts, which I'd long since learned to trust and should have trusted on this, had told her it wasn't right.

"You're sure that's smart?" she'd said when I'd first proposed it. "I mean, your own ancestral home, or whatever that place is?"

"I think it's worth a shot," I'd said. "There'll be a big crowd with lots of cash, according to Bushnell, and since it's all the way down at the other end of the state it's not likely anyone will make us."

Ginny had stared at me a moment longer; then she'd shrugged. "It's your tip," she said, using the pickpocket's word for crowd.

When I came back down the hill an hour later Mr. Bushnell came out to meet me at a lumbering red-faced trot, one big red hand raised above his head as though suspended there, like his emotions, halfway between hurry-up-down-here and get-the-hell-out-while-you-can.

"I don't mind for myself, you understand, Mr. McKay," he said as he came panting up to me. "They're your grandma's things, and if she don't want to sell 'em she don't want to sell 'em. But it's her way of going about it. I don't need to tell you this here's a hotter and it's gonna get a lot worse, and them two boys of mine are getting cranky and I can't say I blame 'em. I told 'em to shilly-shally about the bedstead until I had a chance to talk to you, only she's down there right now pesterin' 'em—"

"What's she's doing?"

"It's what she's *undoing* what hurts," he said. "No sooner do my boys lug a load of stuff around to the tables we got set up on the verandah and go back to get another load than they meet her coming 'round the house with half of what they lugged up the first time. 'Not this,' she says. 'Not that. There ain't no sense in parting with this here. This one was Grandma So-and-so's, and that one belonged to Sister So-and-so, and this here piece Aunt Whatever-her-name brought back from God-knows-where.' She's got a whole attic full of stuff sitting out there in the pasture next to your car, and now she's after the boys to lug that mahogany bedstead back again. And the folks're already starting to come—there are a couple of dozen cars in the pasture already. Now if the little lady wants a keepsake or two I'll be the first to say let her have a keepsake or two, but the way she's going at it I don't rightly know what I can sell and what I can't—and there ain't gonna be nothing left to sell anyways."

"I'll speak to her, Mr. Bushnell," I said. "You tell your boys to leave the bed where it is."

I found her on the verandah trying to extricate, from behind a washstand piled high with Aunt Gertrude's embroidered pillows, the oval mirror that had hung above the pump organ in the parlor.

"I don't think we should let this go," she said. "You must have a place for it in your apartment. Your grandfather made that frame himself. I think that's walnut."

"Grandma, most of my furniture is Danish modern!"

"Well, even the Danes must look at themselves once in a while."

"But I don't want it, Grandma, and neither do you. You won't have room for one-tenth of the things you've put aside unless you rent storage space somewhere, and you know darn well you can't afford it. Besides, I'm sure that Grandfather, wherever he may be, would much rather have a stranger enjoying his mirror than have it stuck away somewhere in some warehouse."

She straightened up slowly and stood for a moment looking down at the mirror. "I suppose you're right," she said. Then she turned and walked away down the verandah. At the door to the dining room she paused and looked back at me. "You know perfectly well where your grandfather is," she said, and went on into the house.

I crossed the lane to the improvised parking area in the pasture where there were now a few dozen cars. Ginny was there now too, sitting hunched down in her old red VW, fourth car in the front row, from where she had a good view of new arrivals as they crossed the lane to the yard in front of the verandah. I went over to my own car and pretended to rummage in the glove compartment for a moment, then stood beside it and scratched my head by way of asking if she'd seen anything interesting, like maybe someone we knew. She yawned and stretched by way of saying no, nothing to get excited about.

Ginny and I had been working together for three years by then and had evolved our own special language. She seemed to have a natural instinct for the work, and could spot a live one half a block away. She knew all the tricks of a good stall—the coat over the arm, the newspaper rolled up to use as a stiff against the mark's back, the front-man ploy, the handkerchief casually dropped to set up a frame. We made a great team and I was confident we'd score big, provided we didn't move until we were sure. . .

My recollection of the next few hours is a confused medley of movement and color and odor and noise, of a growing mass of humanity jammed into the nine hundred square feet of yard between the verandah and the lane and sending out tentacles around and over and through the house and yard and outbuildings.

Sticky-faced children in kneeless blue jeans played tag through the crevices in the crowd and tried to out-thunder one another through the near-empty rooms of the house. Gaunt, red-faced farmers, smelling of a subtle mixture of sweat, manure, tobacco juice, and the dust of hay-mows, clustered in little groups among the sea of battered automobiles in the pasture to chew, with ponderous slow-moving jaws, their tobacco, their crops, and their politics. Farm women in flowered housedresses unfashionably long tut-tutted together over the latest township scandals while watching with half a mind the children who looked strangely too young for them. Families spread blankets, sandwich wrappings, eggshells, and themselves over the needled earth beneath the pine trees in the side yard and up and down the rows of the grape arbor, and lined up ten deep in front of the outhouse.

They moved like ants over the face of McKay's Corners, chatting, quarrelling, crying, scolding—and listening to the voice of Harrison Bushnell. "What am I bid, good people—what do I hear for this fine old five-gallon earthenware crock? The gentleman to my right says eight dollars. Think of it, folks—an afternoon like this one, all hot and gummy, and down in the milk cellar, all pearly dewy on the outside, this fine crock just brimful of thick rich cold buttermilk. Will any one of you step up and say this here crock ain't worth ten dollars? The little lady with the lovely flowers on her hat says nine. Who'll make it ten? Just ten dollars for this fine old earthenware crock. Do I hear ten?"

"He's shouting," said Grandma. She had come up beside me on the fringe of the crowd.

"He's trying to drum up enthusiasm, Grandma. That's his job."

"Your great-great-grandfather brought that crock all the way from Scotland. It doesn't call for any shouting."

"He's simply trying to make money for you."

"Well, anyone who has to be shouted into buying it doesn't deserve it."

She moved off along the edge of the crowd and I turned and went in search of Ginny.

I found her in the side yard, leaning against the rosewood table with the scalloped edge that for as long as I could remember had stood in the center of the parlor holding a cast-iron bust of Emerson. A dozen or so people were wandering about among the welter of furniture and linens and dishes, pausing now and then to run a hand over an item of furniture or stooping to peer closely at some small piece of bric-a-brac. A number of the items now wore bright red tags that bore in bold, black capitals, the message SOLD.

"Well," I said, "what do you think?"

"I think we're in dip's heaven, and we ought to go to work."

"Meaning you've spotted a live one?"

"Are you kidding? I've spotted a dozen."

"No, you haven't."

"Well, a couple anyway."

"We'd better be damn sure. Once we make a move, we won't have long."

"Then how about starting with Sidney Greenstreet over there? In the straw hat."

"The fat man? You sure?"

"Positive. Loose wad in a rubber band. Went into his right tail pit."

"Casual bugger. Who was the—?"

"Scuse me, Mr. McKay, but you're needed 'round front right away." One of Mr. Bushnell's young stalwarts was at my elbow, tugging at my arm. "Old man Bushnell's gonna have a stroke for sure if somebody don't do something about Miz McKay."

"Oh, hell," I said—and, to Ginny, added, "Sit tight just a little while longer, will you? I've got to see what this is all about."

As I came around the corner of the house to the front yard I heard Grandma's voice, startlingly clear above the babble of the crowd.

"Eight dollars!" she called.

From behind his podium on the verandah, Mr. Bushnell was staring at the far fringe of the sea of heads, looking as though he wanted to laugh and was fairly certain he was supposed to laugh but was still groping desperately for the point of the joke. On the table in front of him sat the ornate marble-and-ormolu clock that for as long as I could remember had commanded the center of the massive walnut sideboard in the dining room. It had a black-marble base, mounting in tiers to a round mother-of-pearl face with black hands and inch-high black Roman numerals. On

either side of the face a pair of miniature Corinthian columns in mottled salmon-colored marble supported a flat black-marble top. Ornate ormolu mouldings circled the top and the base, the tops and bases of the columns, and the rim of the clock face. The whole was supported at the four corners by tiny gold feet shaped like a lion's paws.

I hurried around the edge of the crowd to Grandma's side.

"What in heaven's name do you think you're doing?" I asked her.

"I'm bidding on that clock. Papa bought it the time we all went down to the State Centennial Exposition at the capital as a twenty-fifth anniversary present for Mama. They carried it on the seat between them all the way home on the train. I want it."

"But Grandma, why didn't you just say so? It's yours! Everything here is yours. If you wanted it, why didn't you just take it?"

"Eight-fifty!" a man's voice shouted from somewhere down near the far end of the verandah.

"Nine dollars!" cried Grandma.

A number of people near us turned to stare.

"I couldn't," she said. "That man would never have let me have it. You wouldn't have let me have it."

"But, my God, people will think you're a shill!"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what you mean, but I guess I can bid on my own mother's clock if I want to. That Elva Grebbs was bidding on it and *her* mother used to go out in the yard and take down the washing in her slip. Your Aunt Clarissa saw her when they lived on the old Shackleforth place up near Cobb."

"Nine-fifty!" the man shouted.

"Ten dollars!" cried Grandma.

"Mrs. McKay—"

Mr. Bushnell's voice had lost its earlier zest; it rose faintly above the noise of the crowd.

"Ten-fifty!" shouted Grandma.

"Grandma! Nobody else made a bid!"

"Well, I'm not going to let him get away with it! He sold your Aunt Beulah Barlow's mahogany highboy to some total stranger and now he's gone and given your Aunt Gertrude's sunburst quilt to that dreadful Booth woman."

"Eleven!" shouted the man.

"Twelve dollars!" cried Grandma.



"Sold!" bellowed Mr. Bushnell. "Sold to Mrs.—sold to the lady on my right for twelve dollars!" His big blue bandanna was out again, mopping his face.

"What lady?" said Grandma. "Does he mean me?"

"Miz McKay?" A young man who suddenly materialized out of the crowd had red hair, a face full of freckles, and a long, skinny neck with a prominent Adam's apple. There were tiny beads of perspiration clinging to the pale peach fuzz on his upper lip and a wild look in his pale blue eyes. "Miz McKay," he said again, "you're under arrest!"

"What's he saying?" said Grandma. "Does he mean me?"

"County Ordinance 238, Ma'am, making it a misdemeanor to perpetrate an act of shilling at an auction in Pinegrove County. And this here's your house and these are your things, Miz McKay, and there ain't no doubt but what you was shilling your own auction."

"Why, the very idea!" said Grandma. "I never heard of such a thing! What is it he says I was doing?"

"Never mind, Grandma," I said. "I'm Mrs. McKay's grandson, Officer. May I see your identification, please?"

The boy fished a wallet out of his left rear pocket, flipped it open, and held it out to me. The prominent Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Roy Merch," he said. "Deputy Sheriff. And it's my duty—"

"Just a minute, Deputy, there's been a mistake here." I fished my own badge case from the inside left pit of my jacket and held it out so he could read it.

"Sergeant McKay?" he read. "State Police?"

"I bought that clock fair and square," said Grandma to no one in particular, "and I'm not going to let them talk me out of it."

"Special pickpocket squad," I said, "working out of Portersville Barracks. And this is Officer Briggs." I nodded toward Ginny.

"Everybody else who really cares about it has already passed on," said Grandma, "so who has a better right?"

"Then *you're* the cannon cops?" said the deputy. "We was told to hold the wagon ready out behind the barn in case you needed us to transport any prisoners. My partner's out there now."

"Well, I don't believe we'll be needing you after all," I said hastily. "I'm really here just to help my grandmother. And Officer Briggs is here as my guest."

"This isn't the kind of crowd that needs a cannon watch," said Ginny.

"And besides, I drew the short straw," said Grandma. "When Mama died, we girls all drew lots for it, and I drew the short straw."

"My grandmother doesn't quite understand how an auction works," I said. "Somehow she got the idea that once it started, if she changed her mind and decided she wanted to keep something she had to go through the motion of buying it."

Deputy Merch looked from me to Grandma to Ginny and back to me. He seemed relieved.

"She didn't seem a likely sort of person to be shilling," he said with a smile.

"Your grandfather wound it every night," said Grandma, "the last thing before he went to bed. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, trying to sell it to some stranger."

It was almost eight o'clock and the last of the crowd had long since gone by the time I had my car packed ready to leave. The trunk and back seat were crammed with the books, photographs, paintings, and odds and ends that even I couldn't deny were things that—whatever you did with them—you didn't sell to strangers. There had been no room for the clock, so I had set it on the floor of the front seat, where it would ride between Grandma's feet.

Ginny had left, and Deputy Merch. And, after a quick handshake with me and one last half awed, half frightened glance at Grandma, Mr. Bushnell had climbed into his battered pickup truck piled high with furniture and guided it down the rutted lane like a top-heavy galleon riding a rough sea.

I waited in the parlor while Grandma took one last check through the almost-empty house. I could hear her walking around on the floor above—a few tentative steps into an empty carpetless room, a long, silent pause, and then a slow retreat, another room. After a while, I went out onto the verandah to wait.

The sun was just beginning to withdraw behind Culp's Wood when I finally backed my car out of the pasture and eased it down the lane. Beside me, Grandma sat staring ahead down the County Road, her hands folded in her lap.

"We rode all day on the train," she said, "and got to the capital in the evening and then took a street car out to the Exposition. It was my eleventh birthday, so Papa let us stay up till midnight. They had electric

lights down both sides of the Midway as far as you could see, and all the buildings were outlined with them. And there were beautiful fountains everywhere, all lit up. The next day Papa bought a straw hat with a red feather and then talked Mama into wearing it to keep the sun out of her eyes. There were wonderful hot scones full of jelly for sale all along the Midway, and your Great Aunt Clarissa got sick to her stomach in the Hall of Flowers. It was like another world."

As we came abreast of Culp's Wood I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw the setting sun caught and reflected suddenly across the front of the old house so that for a moment all the windows were ablaze with light. I slowed the car, thinking Grandma might want to turn back for one last look, but she made no move to turn and in a moment the trees had closed in behind us, shutting it from view.

"Anyway," she said, "the silly old thing hasn't kept decent time in forty years."

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AHMM4/2380

*The shopkeeper was prepared for punks like Fletcher . . .*



# SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE



by  
**LARRY  
POWELL**

The convict's name was Fletcher. He was serving a five-year sentence for armed robbery, and listening to a woman. The woman's name was Connie, and she had told him the stickup would be easy—just show the storekeeper a gun and order him to empty the cash register. And it had been easy until the moment the storekeeper ducked down and shot Fletcher through a hole in the counter.

Fletcher dropped his gun as he fell. Still stunned by the sudden ex-

plosion and the pain burning in his chest, he gazed with blurred eyes at the storekeeper leaning over him.

"I bored that hole there," said the storekeeper, "because of punks like you. I knew I'd get to use it someday."

"I wouldn't have shot you. I didn't think you'd resist."

"You've got no guts, punk," replied the storekeeper as he dialed the police on the telephone, already smiling the way he planned to smile for the television cameras when he told reporters his story the following day. "None of you punks have got guts."

Connie came to see Fletcher in the county hospital before his trial. She told him how sorry she was that things had gone wrong. "It's a tough break for us both," she said. Then she asked if she could keep Fletcher's car, since he wouldn't be needing it for a while. She didn't say anything about waiting for him.

The only visitor he had after he was sentenced to the state prison was a confidence man named Asa, who had introduced him to Connie and, apparently, felt guilty about it. "How's Connie?" Fletcher asked him.

"She sold your car," said Asa. "I heard that she was going down to Miami. It's nice down there this time of year."

He didn't see Asa or Connie again for a long time. He was assigned to a prison work camp in south Georgia. Every morning at five o'clock a guard woke him by striking the foot of his bed with a wooden club. Then he and the other inmates marched into the mess hall for a breakfast of grits, eggs, and fatback. Fletcher didn't mind the getting up early or the eggs and fatback, but after a few years he got awfully tired of grits.

After breakfast every day, prison-camp personnel divided the inmates into groups of six or eight. Then the inmates marched out to small yellow trucks in which they were driven to work on drainage ditches and roads. The yellow trucks had enclosed bodies like compact steel boxes and the prisoners were locked inside them as they moved from place to place. The enclosures had no windows, only air slits. Riding in them was like being shipped parcel post—and Fletcher had claustrophobia.

The first winter he was in the work camp Fletcher struck his head on a tree limb, fell into a water-filled ditch, and caught pneumonia. During his second year at the camp, the inmates were called out to help fight a forest fire and he stepped in a gopher hole and broke his ankle. Other convicts began to say that he was jinxed and gave him a wide berth, but

he was confident he could change his luck if he lived to get out of prison.

He made it into the fifth year of his sentence before he saw Asa again. They ran into each other in the prison-camp mess hall where Asa was sitting with a group of newly arrived prisoners. "Everybody makes a mistake now and then," Asa explained.

"What do you hear from Connie?"

Asa looked uncomfortable. "Nothing worth repeating. Hey, you know what they say—no news is good news."

"We're talking about my girl, Asa. I got a right to know what she's up to."

Asa told Fletcher he had run into Connie recently at the dog races in Miami. She was living in a condominium with a gambler named Jack Purvis, who drove a silver-grey Mercedes and wore tailored suits and alligator-skin shoes.

Fletcher thought a lot about the gambler's shoes. Convicts in the work camp wore cheap high-top brogans. They had to line the brogans with waxed paper or pasteboard when the soles wore thin, and sometimes they had to go without socks. The soles of Fletcher's feet had grown as rough as sandpaper. It made him angry to think about some gambler with expensive shoes and soft white feet living with Connie, dining out with her in fancy restaurants that never served a single grit, driving her around Miami in a silver-grey Mercedes, and taking her to the dog races.

After a while he stopped being angry about only that and started being angry about everything. For the first time, he began to plan what he was going to do when he got out of prison.

He was released on the last day of May. A truck from the prison camp drove him to the bus station in the nearest town, where a representative of the penal system bought a ticket and handed it to him. "You got friends in Miami, Fletcher?"

"Two," said Fletcher. One had sold his car and the other wore alligator-skin shoes.

He had no prison pallor to attract the attention of the other passengers on the bus. Working outdoors had turned him as brown as a Cuban cigar, but he felt self-conscious about his tight-fitting coat and his bargain-basement suitcase, both gifts of the state. Soon, he thought, he would be able to afford better.

When he arrived in Miami he went to see a loan shark and fence Asa

had told him about. The loan shark examined him with cynical eyes. "You don't look like a good investment to me. On the other hand, a businessman has to take an occasional risk." He laid out the revolver Fletcher wanted. "I won't ask what you plan to do with this, but I hope you get back here to pay for it."

"No sweat," Fletcher assured him. "This time I'm doing my own thinking. You know of a gambler named Jack Purvis?"

"He's a big-time operator. What business could you possibly have with him?"

"I want to thank him," said Fletcher. "He's been taking care of something that belongs to me."

The loan shark plopped a telephone book on the counter. "Purvis is in here."

Fletcher dialed the gambler's number. Connie's voice, which he recognized instantly, spoke a drowsy hello. Three o'clock in the afternoon and she was sleeping.

"Are you alone?" Fletcher asked.

"Jack won't be back for a couple of hours. Who is this?"

She didn't even recognize his voice. Fletcher hung up with a bang and walked across town to the condominium where the gambler lived. He kept his right hand in his pocket, his fingers wrapped around the revolver.

Connie yawned as she opened the door to his knock. "Jack isn't here right now," she said, then her eyes focused and she pawed at her hair. "Say, I know you! Fletch, isn't it?"

"You have a good memory for faces," Fletcher said.

"This is a real surprise, Fletch. I mean—I never expected to see you again."

"I dropped by to pick up my car," Fletcher said.

"I didn't even know you were out, Fletch. I guess I lost track of the time."

"I didn't," said Fletcher. "How's that car of mine running these days?"

"Listen, I had to sell the car. I was leaving town and I needed a stake. When I got down here, I met this fellow—" She realized she was telling him nothing he didn't already know. "What do you really want, Fletch?"

Fletcher leaned against the door, pushing with his shoulder, and she tried to resist without appearing to do so. He won the contest, got inside, and stood looking around.

"You mustn't stay here, Fletch. Jack will be home soon and he might not understand."

"I'll explain it to him." He walked to the bar on the other side of the room. "Why don't you make me a drink while we wait?"

"You look good, Fletch. You really do." Connie glanced nervously at the hand buried in his coat pocket. "That tan is wonderful. Anyone who didn't know better would think you've been spending a lot of time at the beach."

"Would they?"

Connie touched her hair and tongued her lip. "I'll pay you for that car. Right now, though, I'm broke."

"This place doesn't look exactly cheap."

"Jack doesn't give me much money. I have a charge account for clothes, but he doesn't let me have much cash." She faked a laugh. "He says that's the way to keep a girl in line."

"Then it's a good thing for me to remember," said Fletcher. He tapped the fingers of his left hand on the bar. "Make that drink a double Scotch. I haven't had one in five years."

"You can't stay here, Fletch. Something might happen when Jack comes home." Connie went into another room and returned carrying a purse. "It must be money you want. I can let you have fifty dollars, but that's all."

"I was in prison for five years and you offer me fifty dollars. That comes out to ten dollars a year."

"All right, a hundred."

"That's much better," said Fletcher. "Twenty dollars a year."

Connie held the purse in front of her with two hands as if it would protect her if he became violent.

"What's this all about, Fletch?"

He smiled and walked past her into the other room. He opened a closet door. "Look at those suits. Look at all those shoes. Jack is quite a dresser, isn't he?" He picked up one pair of shoes. They were much too small for him. He threw them down again, turned, and caught Connie by the wrist. "Where does he keep his money? He's a gambler. He has to keep some big cash around."

"There's a safe, but I can't open it."

"Jack will open it when he gets here. And he can't tell the cops he was robbed because the money was won in illegal games of chance and he



hasn't paid taxes on it. How do you like the idea, baby? Has old Fletcher smartened up?"

Connie glared at him. "I'm afraid you haven't."

"We'll see," said Fletcher. "And after I've settled with Jack, you know what we can do? We can talk about you and me."

Connie looked appalled.

Jack arrived thirty minutes later, smiling with a flash of white teeth when he entered the apartment and came face to face with Fletcher. "I don't believe we've met."

"I'm an old friend of Connie's. Been away for a while."

"Nice tan you've got there. Where were you, South America?"

"My name is Fletcher. Maybe Connie told you about me."

"Connie doesn't talk much about old friends. What are you drinking, Fletcher?" The gambler, a small dapper man, moved behind the bar on tiny graceful feet as swift as a featherweight boxer's.

"I'll have a double Scotch. Connie was about to pour me one when you came in."

"Are you in Miami on business," asked Jack, reaching under the bar and bringing up a bottle, "or are you just paying Connie a friendly visit?"

"I've got a gun in my pocket," said Fletcher, "and I want the money in your safe. The money you wouldn't like the cops and the tax boys to know you have."

Jack set down the bottle of Scotch without uncapping it. "Now that I think of it, I believe Connie *did* tell me about a guy called Fletcher. Hey, honey, is this the cluck who muffed the stickup?"

"It's him," said Connie, "in all his glory."

Then the gambler ducked behind the bar and Connie scrambled for the sofa, throwing herself onto the floor behind it.

Fletcher took two steps back and pulled out his revolver. This bar didn't have a hole in it and he was ready for whatever happened. "Hey, Jack," he warned, "if you don't come out from there—"

Something slammed into his shoulder as hard as a blow from a prison guard's billy club. He was falling before he realized he had heard a shot. His revolver jumped from his grasp as he struck a chair.

Then he was sprawled on the floor, watching Jack scurry to the weapon he had dropped and scoop it up. As his eyes focused, he could see that Jack was smiling again with all those white teeth.

"I've got your gun now, pal, so you might as well lie easy till the ambulance and the cops get here. You were right about that money, but since you didn't find it I'm just another law-abiding citizen who foiled a robbery attempt."

Fletcher rolled his head. He could see Connie dialing the telephone, calling the cops.

"I'm a careful man. I always keep a loaded piece down with the booze," he heard Jack say. "You know something, pal? You made me mess up a very expensive bar."

Fletcher turned his head and gazed past the alligator-skin shoes at the hole the gambler's bullet had torn in the bar before striking him.

"Yeah. I shot through it," Jack said. "You know what? When you get out of prison next time, you ought to think about changing your line of work."

Fletcher was already thinking about it.

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# LETTERS

I like the Chick Kelly stories by S. S. Rafferty—they have a real New York atmosphere—but there was something I didn't understand in "Go Disco 'Tec, Chick!" in the January 2 issue.

If Fremont died of a heart attack, why wouldn't Dr. Parker sign the death certificate? Why did the medical examiner have to do an autopsy on the body? I thought that was only in cases where murder was suspected, but there seemed no reason in the story to suspect that Fremont was murdered.

George Murray  
Bronx, New York

*There are twelve conditions under which deaths must be investigated and certified by medical examiners according to New York law. (That doesn't necessarily mean an autopsy will be performed, but only a medical examiner can sign the death certificate.) These include deaths due to violence (including accidents), deaths from contagious diseases, industrial diseases and injuries, deaths associated with medical procedures, all cases which are to be cremated, deaths occurring on ships in the harbor or airplanes landing at New York airports, deaths of persons who are in the custody of the law, deaths without medical attendance, and sudden and unexpected natural deaths. In the story, Fremont would be in either or both of the last two categories. Note that there are a lot of germs for story ideas in that list!—S.C.*

You haven't published a novelette for the past few issues. Have you changed your policy about publishing them?

John Herlihy  
Dedham, Massachusetts

*No, we're actively looking for novelette-length stories (8,000-10,000 words). We haven't received as many as usual of late, but we certainly plan to publish the good ones we do receive—one an issue if possible.—S.C.*

---

Our school library receives your magazine and it saves me from many boring study halls. I really did enjoy your story "The Holdup" (by Talmage Powell) in a recent issue. . . The pictures of Mr. Hitchcock on the front of the magazine are fantastic and a marvelous creation of the imagination.

Sharon Davis  
Grand Saline, Texas

---

The story in your December issue, "The Wrong Pocket," was unusual. I really like Jeffry Scott's style of writing, and hope he contributes more for our reading pleasure.

D. J. Kean  
West Des Moines, Iowa

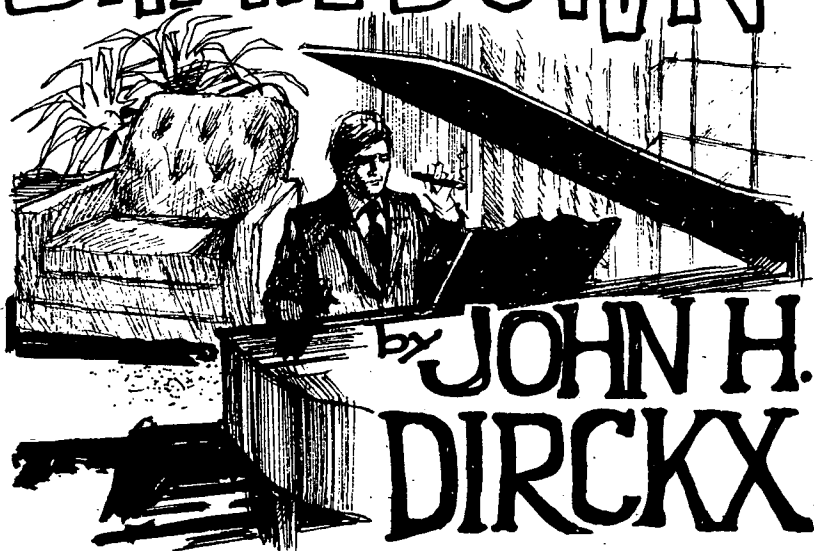
*We're happy to present another unusual Jeffry Scott story in this issue.—S.C.*

---

*If you have any questions about stories or authors in AHMM or the mystery field in general, please write to me: Susan Calderella, Letters Editor, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017, and I'll do my best to answer them.*

*The anonymous caller gave Berrish a warning . . .*

# SHAKE DOWN



by **JOHN H.  
DIRCKX**

The jangling of the telephone broke in on a nocturne by Chopin, shattering Simon Berrish's reverie. He slid off the piano bench and took a long pull at his cigar on the way to the kitchen. There the dusk already lay thick, except where the last rays of the sun struck dull fire from copper pans and bowls hung in picturesque dissymmetry on the brick wall above the ovens.

A vaguely foreign voice at the other end of the line wasted no time on

formalities. "You don't know me. You drive a dove-grey Bentley?"

"Yes, I—"

"There's a detective from Richmond going around town looking at grey Bentleys because of a hit-and-run they had up there a couple of days ago. He just left here. You're next on his list. He asked me the quickest way to get to your place. I just thought you ought to know."

"But how—"

The caller had already hung up. Berrish paused to extinguish his cigar at the sink before turning off the lights and locking up. Less than three minutes after answering the telephone he backed the Bentley out of the driveway and headed west. He didn't notice the dusty van half a block behind him leave the curb at the same time and follow at a distance.

When Berrish returned home forty-five minutes later it was quite dark. He expected to find the detective from Richmond waiting on the front steps and was relieved when he didn't. The Bentley was still dripping water from the car wash as he put it away in the garage.

He was back at the piano warming up for another try at the Chopin with an andante improvisation, somber and not very melodious, when the doorbell rang. As soon as Berrish opened the door the man on the step thrust in his hand, which held a printed card, and flowed in after it.

Berrish looked from his visitor to the card and back again. "Detective Lieutenant Wendell C. Haycey. What can I do for you?"

The detective seemed in no hurry to reply. Standing in the foyer, his hands in his pockets, he surveyed the concert grand piano, the Oriental rugs, and the shelves of faience with phlegmatic disdain. "You a doctor, Mr. Berrish?"

"Investment counselor. What was it you wanted, Lieutenant?"

"About your car. Dove-grey Bentley, license number EGR 5457, right?"

"It sounds like it. I can never—"

"The car out there in your garage is the one I'm talking about. Is that yours or not?"

"It's mine."

"Why'd you run it through the car wash, Mr. Berrish?"

"Maybe we'd better sit down." Berrish led the way into the sunken living room, switching on a lamp as he went. "What's this about a car wash?"

"You just ran your Bentley through a car wash. I want to know why."

"What makes you think—"

"I don't think, I know. The car wash at Northdale Mall, twenty minutes ago. Second lane from the right. I saw you."

"O.K. I'm not denying it. Is it against the law to wash my car?"

"It can be. Maybe you read in the paper about a hit-and-run homicide we had the night before last in Richmond."

"I heard something about it."

"There weren't any witnesses, but from traces on the body the police lab has determined that the car was a grey Bentley. You want to make things easy for yourself and unlock the garage?"

Berrish took the visitor's card out of his pocket and studied it thoughtfully. "Before you get in any deeper," he said, "I think you ought to know that I graduated from high school with Wendell Haycey, which makes him about fifteen years older than you. He's in the Narcotics Division, and he's black. You're not Lieutenant Haycey. So who are you?"

If the dour, pudgy man sitting across the cocktail table from Berrish was disconcerted by this exposure he gave no sign of it. No doubt he drew a certain smug assurance from the feel of the .32 tucked between his belt and his ribs. He caressed the butt of the pistol idly through his coat as he replied, "I'm a private detective."

Berrish eyed the card again. "Haven't you got a license?"

"Not right now."

"How'd you lose it—impersonating a police officer? Or was it blackmail? That was you on the phone, wasn't it? Holding your nose and rolling your r's to disguise your voice. And then you watched the house and followed me. What's your game anyway?"

"No game. The guy that got killed was a friend of mine—a real good friend. I just want to find the lousy slob who ran him over before the police do. Do you mind telling me why you went out to the car wash right after I called?"

A slightly ironic smile played across Berrish's lips as he formulated his answer. "No, I don't mind telling you, even though it's none of your business. The car is actually my wife's. She's out of town. As far as I know Marisa has never even run over an alley cat, but a fellow in my line sort of instinctively shies away from undefined risks. I just felt safer getting the car washed before the police went over it, that's all."

The visitor nodded amiably. "O.K. That's a pretty good answer. Just

tell me this—could your wife have been driving through Richmond a little after midnight on Tuesday night?”

“Not a chance. Marisa goes to bed at ten o’clock every night. If she doesn’t, she falls asleep—wherever she is.”

“Even at the wheel of her car?”

“It isn’t her car. And she hasn’t been out alone after dark in six months. I need a drink. You want something, Mr. —?”

“Name’s Buck Surtees. I’ll try your Scotch and soda. No ice.”

“I’m curious, Buck,” said Berrish from the bar, over the clink of bottles and the splash of soda. “What are you going to do when you find the car that ran over your friend?”

“Depends. I figure sooner or later the police’ll get the guy. Maybe I’ll just shake him up a little. Of course, if he’s pretty well fixed for cash—Thanks. I hope that soda isn’t real cold. My teeth.”

“Cheers. If he’s pretty well fixed—?”

“Then we might work out some kind of business arrangement.”

Berrish nodded as the other took a tentative sip of his drink and then a longer draft. “A little extortion, maybe a false alibi or two. What good is that going to do your friend that got run over?”

Surtees indulged in a hoarse chuckle that threatened to send his upper plate into his lap. “He would have dug it.” He hoisted his glass at a crooked angle and then drained it. “Something I didn’t mention before. What were you doing down at that garbage dump?”

“You mean when I stopped at the landfill behind the post office on the way to the car wash? That must have been you in the black van on the hill road. I wondered if you could see me down there.”

Surtees shrugged. “I saw you stop and get something out of your trunk. I thought you were going to clean up the car out there. Then I saw you dumping a load of stuff over the cliff into the landfill or whatever it is. It looked like something heavy rolled up in a blanket.”

Berrish was at the bar again, pouring seconds. “Plastic trash bags, actually—two of them, taped together mouth to mouth. The heavy-duty kind, for lawn clippings.”

“These townhouses have got back yards?”

“I didn’t say there were lawn clippings in the bags. I said the bags were *made* for lawn clippings.”

Berrish saw a flicker of greed kindling slowly in the other’s restless eyes as he handed him his drink.



"So what was in the bags?"

"You're working this gig alone, are you, Buck? Because this has got to be strictly between you and me. That was my wife in those bags."

"No!"

"I was planning to drop her into the landfill during the night. After you called, I decided I'd better move up the time a few hours."

"You said she was out of town."

"All her friends think so."

"You're telling me you killed your wife and dumped her in that landfill?"

Berrish lounged back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "My piano playing gave her headaches, my cigars gave her asthma, and my income upset her digestion. Call it euthanasia."

"The cops have another name for it. Hey, this booze is heavy stuff. Climbs right out of the glass to meet you. How'd you k-k-kill her?"

"Poison," said Berrish over his shoulder as he moved toward the kitchen. "In a drink."

Surtees, already too befuddled to sense the menace in his host's voice, nevertheless knew something was not right. When he tried to get to his feet the room began bobbing and listing to one side. His vision was going double and his arms and legs twitched aimlessly instead of performing their normal functions. Above the hum in his ears he heard a crackling sound from the direction of the kitchen. And just before lapsing into a stupor from which he would never awake he recognized the sound of heavy-duty plastic trash bags being unfolded.



**The May 21 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale April 24.**

*The stocking killer picked up his victims in singles bars . . .*

# THE EVILS OF DRINK

by  
**RICHARD  
DEMING**



**W**hen she retired at sixty-three Loretta Beam wanted to stay in Los Angeles, but she didn't want to risk being murdered in her bed. And after thirty years as a welfare worker she knew there were sections of the city where a 103-pound spinster lady wouldn't be safe in her own home.

Therefore, after finding what seemed to be an ideal location for her needs she did a considerable amount of checking before signing the lease. She made the same thorough kind of investigation she was used to making

in her welfare cases. From the police she learned that the section of the Boyle Heights district where the duplex was located was a low-crime area. From nearby residents she found out it was a quiet neighborhood. And of course she called on and became acquainted with the tenants in the other half of the duplex.

John and Angela Garrett were in their early thirties and had no children. They did have a cat, however—a Siamese tom named Edward—which Loretta considered a plus. John Garrett was a stolid, chunky man with a rather dull personality, but he was cordial enough. He drove a bread truck for a living. Angel, a plump, placid woman with dyed blonde hair, was a clerk in a department store.

During her brief visit Loretta was unable to unearth any intellectual interests the couple shared with her. John's main interest seemed to be watching sports on television, and Angela's seemed to be situation comedies. But they qualified in her judgment as acceptable neighbors. They seemed clean, their house was neat, and they were unlikely to have loud parties; they told her they seldom entertained.

It wasn't until after she had signed the two-year lease and moved in that Loretta found out about Friday nights.

That was the night the Garretts drank. Every Friday. It always started peacefully enough, but after a time they became quarrelsome, and it always ended in a shouting match. The wall between the two units was so thin Loretta could hear every word if she wanted to. As it happened, she preferred not to, and deliberately tried not to listen. But it was impossible not to hear the louder shouts, and some of them were so vulgar they caused Loretta to blush. And Mrs. Garrett had the greater capacity for obscenity.

Loretta believed in being a good neighbor. The first two Friday nights she simply endured in silence. But the third week the couple became so loud she felt some protest was justified. She took her broom from the closet and pounded on the connecting wall with the handle.

Her thumping brought momentary silence from the other side. Then Angela Garrett yelled through the wall, "How would you like that broom shoved up your nose, you old bat?"

Shocked, Loretta put her broom away and made no further protest when the fighting resumed in a somewhat lower tone. But she was even more shocked the next morning when she answered a tap on her back

door to find Angela with a cup in her hand and a friendly smile on her face.

"Hi," the woman said cheerily. "Can I borrow a cup of sugar?"

Flabbergasted, Loretta murmured, "Of course," let the woman in, and filled her cup with sugar.

"Thanks," Angela said, still cheery. "I'll return it this afternoon as soon as I come back from the store."

"No hurry," Loretta assured her, still not recovered.

Shortly after lunch John Garrett returned the sugar. Shamefaced, he asked if Loretta would excuse their noise of the previous night.

"Of course," she said, equally embarrassed.

"Don't pay any attention when my wife yells like that," he advised her. "She does that when she's had one too many. She doesn't even remember it, which is why she sent me back with the sugar. I didn't tell her how she yelled through the wall until after she'd been over here this morning, and now she's ashamed to come back."

"Please tell her not to be," Loretta said, now understanding that morning's astonishing visit. "I like to get along with my neighbors and I hope there won't be a strain between us."

"There won't be as far as we're concerned," he assured her, relieved. "I'll tell my wife there are no hard feelings."

"Please do."

That was the beginning of what developed into the oddest relationship Loretta had ever had. Eventually, during a particularly violent Friday-night argument, Loretta again risked pounding on the connecting wall with her broom handle. Again Angela Garrett screamed through the wall. Again the next day Angela acted as friendly as ever, as though nothing had happened.

- This time Mr. Garrett made no apology, though he looked a bit uncomfortable when Loretta happened to encounter him in the back yard the next morning. As weekly apologies would only have embarrassed Loretta, she was just as happy that nothing was said and a tacit understanding developed between her and Garrett that Friday nights would simply not be mentioned.

There also developed a kind of routine on those Friday nights when the noise became unbearable to Loretta. She would rap on the wall and Angela would shout some insult through it. Often the fighting would stop, however, and even if it didn't it usually resumed at a lower decibel

level. Loretta ignored the insults and on Saturday mornings she and Angela would be on neighborly terms again.

One Friday night Loretta was seated at her kitchen table having a cup of tea when the weekly fight started in the kitchen next door.

She heard Angela scream, "Who are you calling a mess?"

"You!" her husband yelled back. "Go look in a mirror. You're at least twenty pounds overweight."

"So you're Burt Reynolds?"

"Compared to you I'm a Greek god!" he shouted.

Loretta was contemplating getting out her broom but, unaccountably, there was a long period of dead silence. Eventually, from the tenor of the argument when it again resumed, she realized the respite was because Mrs. Garrett had been out of the room, presumably in the bedroom dressing to go out.

John Garrett said loudly, "Where do you think you're going?"

"To one of those singles bars," Angela spat back. "I want to see if other men think I'm such a mess!"

"You aren't going to any singles bar at this time of night!" her husband said even more loudly.

"I'll go anywhere I please any time I want!" Angela shouted. "You just try to stop me!"

"You think I can't?" he shouted back, and there was the sound of a chair overturning.

Angela screamed, "You dare touch me and I'll have you in jail!"

Loretta was not alarmed that physical violence was about to erupt. Mrs. Garrett often screamed such warnings at her husband, but so far as Loretta knew he had never struck her. Their fighting was strictly verbal. There was always a first time, however, and just in case Mr. Garrett was on the verge of losing control of himself Loretta thought it would be wise to let him know she heard the argument. Opening the broom closet, she took out the broom and banged the handle against the wall three times.

There was momentary silence, then Angela Garrett yelled, "Mind your own business, you old witch, or I'll be over there to mind it for you!"

The threat left Loretta unruffled. Having attracted their attention, she was content to put the broom away and return to her tea.

John Garrett's voice thundered, "You step out that door and you won't get back in!"

"Who wants to come back to this stinking place?" Angela yelled at the top of her voice.

The back door slammed so hard it made Loretta wince. Getting up, she peered out her kitchen window. It was quite dark, about 9:30, but Angela had turned on the light in their open carport. As she climbed into the car, Loretta could see that she was dressed up.

The engine started and the car backed into the driveway. Leaving the carport light on, Angela roared away. Loretta felt alarmed concern, wondering if the woman was sober enough to drive.

A half hour later Loretta was watching the 10:00 news on television when her doorbell rang. When she peered through the peephole and saw it was John Garrett, she opened the door.

He was in shirtsleeves, and he was half drunk.

He spoke with the careful enunciation of an intoxicated man striving to conceal his condition. "Sorry to bother you, Miss Beam, but I wondered if my wife was over here."

In thirty years of welfare work Loretta had developed an instinct for detecting lies that was little short of miraculous. She knew instantly that her next-door neighbor was fully aware that his wife wasn't with her.

"No," she said politely. "Why would she be here?"

"Well, we had a little argument and she walked out. I thought maybe—" He let it trail off.

The man certainly must have heard his wife say she was going to a singles bar, Loretta thought. He must also have heard her drive off. What was his purpose in this pretense?

She said, "I thought I heard her shout something about going to a singles bar, Mr. Garrett."

"Oh, sure—I heard that. But I thought she was just trying to make me jealous. I thought maybe she ducked in here, figuring on letting me stew for a while. I never thought she'd do anything as dangerous as actually going to one of those places."

"Dangerous, Mr. Garrett?"

"Well, both of those stocking-killer victims were picked up in bars."

Loretta recalled the two unsolved murders some months back. The victims, both women, had been found in their own cars, parked near MacArthur Park, strangled with nylon stockings that were still knotted around their throats. The investigation in each case had disclosed that

the victim was last seen leaving a tavern with a man who had just picked her up. Unfortunately, in neither case had anyone been able to give a clear description of the man.

Loretta said, "The odds against your wife running into the stocking killer must be rather long, Mr. Garrett."

"Maybe, but it could happen. I'm really worried."

Loretta's built-in lie detector told her he wasn't actually in the least worried. The chilling thought occurred to her that perhaps he was making such a point of his worry because he planned to hunt down his wife, strangle her with a stocking, and let the stocking killer take the blame.

Instantly and a trifle guiltily she dismissed the thought as both melodramatic and impractical. Angela hadn't mentioned to which bar she was going. Her husband would never be able to look for her in every bar in Los Angeles—even if he did have homicidal intentions.

She said, "I really don't think you have much to worry about, Mr. Garrett. She'll get home safely, I'm sure."

"I hope so," he said with patent insincerity. "I'm sorry we got so loud that you had to knock on the wall again, Miss Beam."

"I'm sorry I had to," she replied with the old embarrassment.

"Did you hear the whole fight?" he inquired. "What it was about, I mean?"

Her embarrassment evaporated, to be replaced by polite chilliness. "I try not to eavesdrop, Mr. Garrett. I make a conscious effort not to listen to what is said when you and Mrs. Garrett have your—disagreements. It isn't the words but the volume that sometimes causes me to knock on the wall."

"I see. Then you don't know what it was about. But you did hear Angela say where she was going?"

For some reason she could not divine, the man wanted to know exactly how well she could hear through the wall, and also how much attention she paid to what was said.

She said, "Mr. Garrett, I probably could have heard every word of your—discussion—if I had listened. But I'm not interested in your personal affairs. I simply don't listen."

"I see," he said again. "Well, I'm sorry I disturbed you, Miss Beam. Good night."

She closed and relocked her door, Loretta wondered what in the world that had been all about. She also wondered why it had taken him

half an hour after his wife left to come over and inquire about her.

A possible answer occurred to her. Perhaps he had been sitting home plotting what to say to Loretta and working out the details of some devious plan. Despite her conclusion that he would never be able to find his wife, even if he did have homicide in mind, she couldn't dispel the irrational worry that he had exactly that in mind.

That worry prevented her from sleeping well. The more she thought about it the more certain she became that he was planning something. She could sense it as surely as she used to sense that a welfare client was about to take a job and not report it.

The next morning she was relieved to discover she had worried needlessly. Angela Garrett had returned home safely. She came over, suffering nothing worse than a hangover, to tell Loretta that she and her husband would be out of town for the rest of the weekend and to ask her to feed the cat. When Loretta said she would be glad to, the woman gave her an extra key to her back door and told her the cat's dish and the cat food would be next to the electric can opener on the kitchen counter.

The Garretts must have returned very late Sunday night because Loretta didn't hear them come in, but she heard them depart for work on Monday morning. They were gone before she remembered the key to their back door. She reminded herself to return it that evening, but it slipped her mind.

The following Friday the Garretts had their worst, longest fight since Loretta had moved in. It started about 8:00 and by 8:30 it had developed into a shouting match. At 9:00, having put up with a hideous half hour of abusive screaming without pause, Loretta pounded on the wall with her broom. There was the usual momentary silence, then Angela shouted, "Some night I'll make you eat that broom, you old hag!"

Undisturbed, Loretta put away her broom and started to make herself a pot of tea. The fight next door continued, but at a subdued decibel level. At about 9:30, however, it got loud again.

Loretta was still in the kitchen, washing her teacup and teapot, when she heard John Garrett call from the kitchen next door, "You think that same guy you claim bought you all the drinks last Friday will be at the Coed Club again tonight?"

"What do you mean, *claim*?" Angela called back petulantly from the front room.



"Aw, nobody bought a mess like you any drinks!"

There was an outraged yell that started in the front room and ended in the kitchen. "You think I made that fellow up?" Angela shouted. "Well, maybe tonight I'll just accept his invitation to go to breakfast after the place closes!"

"You can forget about that!" he said loudly. "You're not stepping out of this house tonight!"

"That's what you think, buster!"

During the ensuing silence, which Loretta assumed was because Angela was in the bedroom dressing to go out, she wondered why Mr. Garrett had deliberately goaded his wife into going back to the singles bar. There was no question in her mind that it had been deliberate. She had heard the calculation in his voice.

She started to become uneasy. Perhaps Mrs. Garrett had survived last Friday night only because her husband didn't know where to find her. But apparently she had since then not only told him where she had gone—but what had happened there.

In a few minutes the silence was broken by John Garrett insisting, "You're not going to that club—and that's final!"

His wife's only answer was the slam of the back door. Again Loretta peered out her kitchen window and saw Angela climb into the car and drive off, leaving the carport light on.

Five minutes later Loretta's doorbell rang. Again it was John Garrett. This time he was dressed in a suit and necktie. Although he had obviously been drinking, he didn't seem as drunk as he had been the previous Friday.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Beam," he said. "I suppose you heard Angela storm out again."

"Yes," Loretta admitted.

"She's off to that singles bar again."

Loretta waited.

He fingered his necktie.

"I figure what's good for the goose is good for the gander—I'm going out too."

"Your philosophy is none of my business," Loretta said distantly.

"No, I guess not," he conceded. "What I came over for—I wonder if you'd do me a favor?"

"Such as?"

"In case Angela decides to come back and wonders where I am, will you tell her I'm at the Friendly Tavern? That's the one a couple of blocks from here, over on Pennsylvania Avenue."

"You expect her to come back?" Loretta asked.

"I don't know. But if she does I'd like to make up. You can tell her I'll wait for her at the tavern right up to closing time—2:00 A.M."

"All right, Mr. Garrett. If she stops here I'll deliver the message."

When he had gone and she had relocked the door, she began to worry seriously. Her built-in lie detector told her John Garrett had no expectation of his wife returning and asking Loretta where he was. She was convinced that the real purpose of his visit was simply to let Loretta know where he was going. And the only reason she could think of for that was that he was constructing an alibi.

She was worried enough to consider calling the police. But after some thought she decided that if she told the police her reason for suspecting that John Garrett planned to murder his wife was merely intuition they would think she was dotty. In the end she merely had another sleepless night.

In the morning when she looked out her kitchen window and she saw the Garretts companionably weeding the back lawn together she was glad she hadn't phoned the police.

Maybe she *was* getting dotty, she thought. She decided to suppress any future suspicions she had about John Garrett before she got herself classified at the police department as a crank.

The next Friday night battle was mild enough so that Loretta didn't even have to use the broom. But the week after that they had one as loud and long as the one that ended with John Garrett goading his wife into making a return visit to the Coed Club.

Again it started about 8:00 P.M., while Loretta was having a cup of tea at her kitchen table. At first she could hear only an occasional phrase as one voice or the other rose momentarily. The shouting didn't begin until about half an hour later, when the sounds of battle became so loud that they distracted Loretta from the television program she was watching.

She put up with it for another twenty minutes, but when it showed no sign of abating she went to the kitchen for the broom.

Mrs. Garrett was screaming something about her husband's sloppiness as Loretta raised the broom handle. Then, before she could drive it

against the wall, there were three sharp thumps immediately followed by Mrs. Garrett shouting, "Some night I'll make you eat that broom, you old hag!"

Loretta stared at the broom in astonishment. For a wild moment she thought it had somehow leaped from her grip to pound against the wall of its own volition, then she realized no such thing had happened—the thumps had come from the other side of the wall.

But if one of the Garretts had thumped on the connecting wall for some incomprehensible reason, why had Mrs. Garrett yelled at her for doing it?

It didn't take her long to figure out a possible answer. When she peered out her kitchen and saw that the Garretts' carport was empty, it became the probable answer.

Going to the Garretts' back door, she unsuccessfully tried to peer past the edges of the shade drawn over the pane of glass in the upper part of the door. Unable to see anything, she knocked, at first timidly, then with increasing force. She really didn't expect an answer, but it took her some time to get up sufficient courage to try the door. It was locked.

All this time the argument in the kitchen raged on. While Loretta stood listening, Edward, the cat, nearly gave her heart failure by rubbing against her leg. Gazing down at him reminded her of the key she had forgotten to return.

Returning to her apartment for the key, she let herself into the Garretts' kitchen. Entering with her, Edward made a beeline for the front room.

As Loretta had suspected, a tape recorder was on the kitchen table, playing back a tape.

Loretta was familiar with tape recorders—the Welfare Department used them instead of dictaphones. Shutting off the machine, she studied the ninety-minute tape, then, returning it to the machine and switching to FAST FORWARD and periodically switching back to PLAY in order to check that she had not yet reached the end of the recording, she finally did reach it. It ended with the same scene as two Fridays previously, when John Garrett goaded his wife into slamming out of the house to go to the Coed Club.

No wonder Garrett's voice had sounded so calculating that night, Loretta thought. He had been recording the entire fight for replay. Now she understood why the man had been so concerned over how well she could hear their fights and how closely she listened. He must have been relieved

to learn she paid as little attention as possible since that lessened the chance of her recognizing tonight's battle as a replay.

Her suspicion of John Garrett had not been from dottiness after all, she thought, with less relief than regret. Her regret was because she was quite sure it was too late to save Mrs. Garrett.

Loretta visualized the probable sequence of events. Some time prior to 8:00 P.M., and probably immediately prior to it, Mr. Garrett had strangled his wife with a nylon stocking and loaded her into the back of their car. Then he had returned to the house long enough to switch on the recorder. By the time Loretta heard the first raised voices he must have been well on his way to MacArthur Park.

She decided that his plan must be simply to abandon the car near where the other two victims were found, then return to the house by bus or taxi. Bus, probably, she thought—there would be less chance of his being remembered on a bus. He planned to get back before the tape played out, thus establishing a perfect alibi. No doubt he meant to stop by Loretta's again to make sure she had heard his wife slam out of the house, then go on to the Friendly Tavern to complete his alibi by sitting there until it closed at 2:00 A.M.

Loretta ran the tape back to the place it had been before she hit the FAST FORWARD button and switched the machine to PLAY. Then she went back to her own apartment to use the phone.

When John Garrett arrived home a half hour later, he found his next-door neighbor and two policemen waiting on the front porch. From inside his duplex, only slightly muffled by the closed front door, came the sounds of verbal battle between him and his wife.

"Good evening, Mr. Garrett," Loretta said in a tone of reproach.

Licking his lips, he looked from her to the two policemen. In a desperate attempt to deny the obvious he asked, "Who's that arguing in my apartment?"

Both policemen ignored the question. The elder of the two intoned, "Are you John Garrett?"

"Yes," Garrett admitted nervously.

"Mr. Garrett, you are under arrest on suspicion of the murder of your wife, Angela Garrett. You are not required to make any statement, and if you do it may be taken down and used against you in evidence. You are entitled to legal counsel, and have the right to have an attorney

present at all stages of the arrest, arraignment and trial procedure. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one may be furnished you at public expense."

"Murder?" Garrett said on a high note. "What makes you think my wife's dead?"

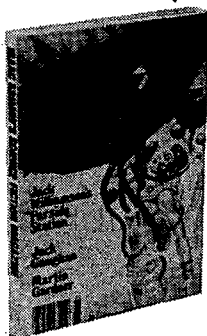
The older policeman said, "Because while you were on the way home by bus a couple of officers found her body in the back seat of your car where you had parked it at Seventh and Parkview."

Garrett stared blankly from one policeman to the other. "What made you look there?" he asked finally.

"We figured it would be near where the other two bodies were found," the older man told him. "Or, rather, your neighbor here figured that—and we agreed with her."

Loretta spoke up. "One of the evils of drink, Mr. Garrett, is that it muddles the mind. If you had been thinking more clearly, it might have occurred to you to erase the broom thumps from your recording."

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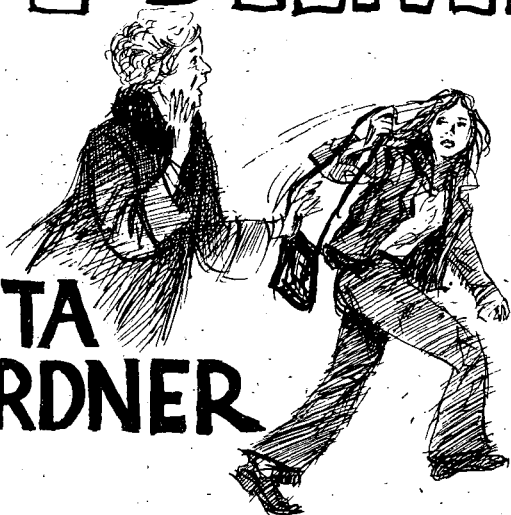
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*Mrs. Maynard needed the bonds . . .*

# SAFE DELIVERY

**TONITA  
S. GARDNER**



The phone rang, startling me out of a restless sleep. As I groped for it in the dark the baby stirred inside me, kicking so furiously I had to catch my breath. I grabbed the receiver. Maybe it was Frank, calling from one of the truck stops where he usually beds down for the night.

"Hello?"

"Sandy?" A woman's voice, barely whispering.

"Yes, it's me."

"My dear, I have bad news."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Maynard!" Her husband's heart had been failing for so long that she didn't have to say what it was. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine, dear. And I'm sorry to be calling at this hour. It's just that—" Her voice broke, and I knew how helpless she felt, sensed what was on her mind. But Mrs. Maynard was too much of a lady to mention it at a time like this.

So I mentioned it. "Mrs. Maynard, you're entitled to those bonds. Your husband was going to transfer them to a safe deposit box in your name."

"Yes, Norman was hoping to get them first thing Monday morning." There was a painful pause. "He wanted me to have them before he died."

"Mrs. Maynard, please don't worry. I'll take care of everything for you." I hung up the phone and felt a twinge radiating from my back to my stomach. Reminding myself that the baby wasn't due till next month, I got dressed and reached for my pocketbook. Luckily I'd been scheduled to work for one more week. I could still get into the office. Once there, I'd find the combination and open the safe. But I had to hurry. Otherwise, as soon as Mr. Maynard's nephew learned of his uncle's death he'd swoop down on the bonds and make off with them.

I was determined to beat him to it, for Mrs. Maynard's sake. She was depending on those bonds to survive, and she deserved whatever help I could give. Yes, I really loved that old lady. If not for her five years ago, I would have been thrown in jail.

I had been a frightened seventeen-year-old smart-aleck who'd run away from her final foster home. No one could tell me what to do. I hadn't eaten in two days and needed money desperately.

And then I saw this dainty little woman strolling along in a fur-collared coat. I hurried up to her.

"Excuse me," I said, holding out a broken cigarette I'd found in the gutter. "Do you have a match?"

"Oh, no, child. I don't smoke and neither should you. It's bad for you—" Before she could finish, I'd snatched her purse and was running away with it.

I didn't get far. A man built like a football player noticed me in action and came after me. He turned out to be a plainclothes policeman.

My victim refused to press charges. "This girl is no criminal," she

insisted. "Can't you see she's just hungry?" Taking hold of my arm, she brought me to her apartment and prepared a delicious meal for me.

Between bites, I apologized for what I'd done and admitted how badly I needed money and why.

When her husband came home, she introduced us. "Norman, this is Sandy Barrow."

"I'm pleased to meet you, young lady." He didn't ask who I was or where I'd come from. Obviously his wife had taken in strays before.

"Darling, Sandy could use a job. And we both know someone who's looking for help."

He nodded. "I was about to place an ad for a gal Friday," he told me. "Can you type?"

"A little."

"I bet you're good at figures."

"Oh, yes! I've always gotten A's in math."

"I knew you were a bright girl," he said. "When can you start?"

"Right now," I told him.

"Sorry." He winked at his wife. "You'll have to wait till morning."

Centro Tool was a small old-fashioned manufacturing operation in the middle of an industrial area. There were two workers in the shop, both as old as Mr. Maynard. The place was filled with noise and dirt. All the tools were made by hand. I was fascinated. I kept the books, did the billing, and answered the phone. For the first time in my life I felt needed—useful. The Maynards treated me like a daughter, inviting me to dinner every Sunday and encouraging me to make friends and continue my education. I was so busy fixing up my tiny new apartment and so happy with my job that I wanted everything to stay as it was.

For three years, it did. Then Mr. Maynard had his first heart attack. Even though he recovered, he could no longer run the business by himself. He was about to sell it when his nephew volunteered to help out.

I disliked Melvin from the start. It wasn't just his phony tan and unwashed smell and the way he leered at me as if I was an on-the-job fringe benefit. What I hated most was the way he bad-mouthed Mr. Maynard behind his back.

"Ever see a company run like this?" he complained. "No records of purchase, no inventory control, nothing. And if Uncle Norm had half a



brain those old goats in the back would have been fired years ago. Nowadays everything's automated—saves time."

"Maybe his methods aren't new," I said defensively, "but they've earned your uncle a good living."

"He could have done better," argued Melvin. "All he's got to show for years of work is a lousy fifty-thousand-dollar nest egg."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because it's right here in the safe in bearer bonds." He sniffed disgustedly. "Any moron knows you don't tie up capital like that. It should have been plowed back into the business. Know what *I'd* do if I had those bonds? I'd cash them in and invest the money."

I didn't like the way his mind worked. "Those bonds belong to your uncle," I reminded him. "You couldn't cash them."

"That's what you think," he snickered. "*Anyone* can redeem bearer bonds."

When I mentioned this conversation to Mrs. Maynard, she confided that she too had never trusted Melvin. "But what can I do?" she sighed. "If he knew that his nephew was such a schemer, Norman would be devastated. Those bonds mean a great deal to him." She explained that her husband had bought them twenty years earlier. He insisted they'd brought him luck—a happy late-in-life marriage—and he was reluctant to give them up. So they remained in the safe for, as she put it, "a rainy day."

I thought the story very romantic and wondered if I'd ever find someone who would feel that way about me.

Then, one morning as I was bending over a ledger, I looked up to see a thoughtful face topped by a handsome mass of curly black hair.

"May I help you?" I asked.

With a smile that made me quiver, he handed me a bill of lading, announced that he had to pick up a shipment of star drills, and introduced himself.

And that's how I met Frank.

When he asked me to marry him a few months later, the first person I told was my guardian angel, Mrs. Maynard. She helped me choose a wedding dress and helped us find an apartment. And when she learned I was expecting, she immediately began knitting a baby blanket and a beautiful little sweater set.

I vowed to stay on the job as long as I could. Meanwhile, with Mr. Maynard growing more infirm, Melvin had just about taken over the business—or what was left of it. But two or three times a week his uncle would put in a few hours at the office. Sometimes he'd ask Melvin to open the safe for him. "My eyes aren't as good as they used to be," he'd explain.

I suspected that Mr. Maynard's visits were the only thing that kept Melvin from helping himself to the bonds; certainly nothing stopped him from helping himself to the merchandise.

Frank and I found that out one Saturday afternoon.

We'd taken a ride to the suburbs to have dinner with some friends. Passing a hardware store, Frank remembered that we needed ceiling paint and brushes, so we went into the store.

While my husband was making his selections, I browsed through the tool department and noticed a familiar-looking claw hammer with its imprint scratched out.

Calling Frank over, I showed it to him.

"It's from Centro," he agreed.

"But this store isn't one of our accounts."

The proprietor saw us inspecting the hammer. "I'll give you a good buy on that." He named the price, well below wholesale.

"We're familiar with the item," said Frank. "How can you sell them so cheap?"

"I get a special discount," the man admitted. "Fella I deal with says the company makes up a big batch in case there's a re-order. If they're stuck with the extras, he takes 'em off their hands and peddles them just above cost. Comes here once a month. Tan-skinned fella with a station wagon."

"It's Melvin," I told Frank as we left the store. "No wonder the stock's been dwindling."

I decided not to say anything to the Maynards. A shock like that could kill Mr. Maynard, and his wife, I was sure, could do nothing about it. But from then on I began to watch Melvin carefully. It was a frustrating experience. With no inventory control there was no way to verify how many tools were walking out of the shop.

More than the merchandise, I worried about the bonds. Even when Mr. Maynard mentioned that he intended to transfer them to a bank and retire from business I was certain Melvin would never let them go. Each

day, the moment he arrived at work, Melvin would open the safe. Then, like a woman greedily admiring jewels she'd love to own, he'd paw through the bonds before locking them back in the safe. The safe was an old-fashioned Mosler, numbered 0 to 99. Before he went home, he'd fiddle with the dial, twisting and turning it in different directions, though he'd always leave it pointing to 75. I couldn't figure out why.

Naturally I'd never been given the combination. But right after I'd started the job I'd been looking for a missing invoice I suspected had fallen between the file drawers. As I poked my hand around I felt something scotch-taped beneath the bottom drawer. I pulled it out and found a sealed envelope with the words "Safe Combination" written on it in Mr. Maynard's handwriting. Not daring to break the seal, I taped the envelope back in place and resumed my search for the missing invoice.

Now I couldn't imagine what I'd do if I hadn't discovered that envelope.

I emerged from my building and signaled a taxi.

"Where to, lady?" The driver peered at my bulging stomach a little apprehensively. "The hospital?"

"No," I said. But as I gave him my destination I was startled by a stab of pain. Not now, I silently pleaded, and felt relieved when the pain went away.

The surrounding neighborhood was dark, forbidding. I saw myself leaving the shop with the bonds only to be mugged by some drifter. We pulled up to the nearest corner, half a block from Centro Tool. I got out, wishing Frank was with me. "Would you wait here?" I asked the cabbie. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

"Sure," he said. "But how do I know you'll show up?"

I paid the fare and gave him a big tip to stay, hoping I could trust *him*.

As I unlocked the door, I regretted that I hadn't brought a flashlight, then decided that if the police were patrolling a flashlight would mark me as a burglar. But with the fluorescents on I was fully visible from outside.

Praying that no one would see me, I opened the filing cabinet, reached inside for the envelope, and panicked. It was gone! Frantically I pulled out each of the drawers, poked my hand under and around them. I found nothing. Tears burned my eyes. Either Melvin had discovered the envelope or Mr. Maynard had removed it.

Another pain started, making me cry out. I timed it: almost a minute.

But the tension was worse than the pain.

Sweat breaking out on my forehead, I tried to think. Instead I pictured Melvin giving the dial one quick turn, opening the safe, and taking out the bonds.

One quick turn?

Impossible!

Unless—I recalled Melvin's hangup about saving time—he'd pre-set the combination so he could steal the bonds in a hurry.

One quick turn?

My hand was trembling as I eased the dial back to zero and twisted the handle.

The door swung open—the bonds were inside!

As I removed them I felt another pain, sharper than before.

There was no denying it. The baby was on its way and I'd have to get to the hospital.

The bonds? I couldn't take them with me any more than I could leave them for Melvin.

I grabbed a manila envelope, addressed it to Mrs. Maynard, sealed the bonds inside, and stamped it. Then I shut the lights.

As I was locking the front door behind me a station wagon screeched to a stop and Melvin jumped out. His jaw dropped when he saw me.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Rattled, I felt my heart racing. What could I possibly tell him? I moved out of his reach. "I'm—I'm on my way to the hospital," I improvised. "I left my Blue Cross papers in my desk. So—" I held up the manila envelope, blank side out—"I stopped off to get them."

One eyebrow formed a skeptical arch. He opened the door. "Wait for me," he ordered. "I'll give you a lift." He hurried inside.

I didn't wait. Halfway to the corner, as an overwhelming pain propelled me forward, I heard him coming after me. If I could only reach the cab!

I made a last desperate dash around the corner.

It was like an endless nightmare. The street was empty, the cab gone. I forced my feet ahead. Melvin caught up. Barely able to breathe, I faced him and, holding the envelope behind me, started inching backward.

"O.K.," he said, "you've had your fun. Now give me those bonds."

I began to scream. Melvin began dogging my footsteps. I kept on screaming, inching backward. He tried to grab my arm. I lurched to one side. Something grazed my shoulder. I turned and thought I saw a mirage,

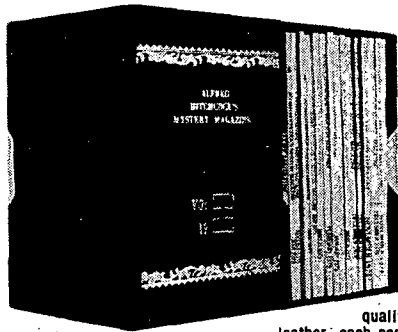
but just as Melvin lunged for the envelope the mirage became a mailbox. I reached for the lid and Melvin clamped his hand on mine. Suddenly a pair of blinding headlights came zooming toward us.

"The police!" I shouted, and Melvin relaxed his grip. In that instant I lifted the lid and dropped the envelope into the mailbox.

The next few minutes are a blank. I must have fainted. When I came to, a man with a worried look was bending over me.

"Hey, lady, are you O.K.?" It was the cabbie, explaining that he'd just gone for coffee. "That guy was tryin' to mug-you," he added. "Good thing I scared him off." He helped me to my feet and into the cab.

The pains were coming faster now, but now I welcomed them. As we sped to the hospital I offered a thankful prayer that the baby and the bonds would both soon be safely delivered.



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SAFE DELIVERY

79

*Crawford had always known someone would come to kill him . . .*

# THE NINE FEELS OF MADAME WU



by  
EDWARD D. HOCH

The illustration depicts a scene inside a shop. A man in a light-colored shirt is seated at a table, looking down at a book or document. A woman, Madame Wu, is seated across from him, looking towards him. The shop is filled with various items, including a large fan, a vase of flowers, and a small table with a teapot and cups. The style is a detailed black and white line drawing.

**M**adame Wu's shop on a small street in East Bangkok was crowded with tourists that April afternoon, and so she had to get the teenaged neighbor girl to watch the place while she went to the canal to release her eels. It was a ritual which had not varied in Madame Wu's life since the American, Sid Crawford, had moved in with her. That had been nearly ten years ago now, during those crumbling final years of the Vietnam War.

While Madame Wu tended her shop of Chinese curios, Crawford made his living from February to June of each year by engaging in the traditional Bangkok sport of kite fighting. The events were usually held in the early evenings at the Pramane Ground near the Grand Palace, where a strong southerly wind provided fuel for the sky battles. And on the afternoons before Crawford's especially important fights Madame Wu went to the Klong Maha Nak, the canal near her shop, to release the traditional eels. Nine was a lucky number in Thailand, and setting free that number of eels was considered to bring good fortune.

Madame Wu bought the eels in a water-filled plastic bag from a street urchin who sold them for that purpose. She often suspected he later recaptured some of the same eels from the canal to sell all over again, but that was not her concern. She was interested only in assuring Crawford's victory in the kite fight above the Pramane Ground.

She went to the lily-strewn waters of the canal alone and dumped the writhing mass of eels into it, watching them splash and swim away, darting through the dark masses of lily pads until they disappeared from view. Then she returned to the little apartment above her shop, where Crawford was putting the finishing touches on his kites.

"I have released the eels," she told him. "You will have good luck."

He looked up at her and smiled. He was a slim man now in his middle forties, with a streak of grey knifing through his otherwise black hair. The handsome American, they had called him when he first came to Bangkok—but, if he was no longer quite so handsome, then neither was Madame Wu herself. They had both drifted uncertainly into middle age.

"I have little faith in your eels," he admitted, "but if the ritual pleases you that's enough. Will you be coming with me this evening?"

"Of course. I will close the shop early."

"That is good, Anna," he said, attaching another barb to the string of his star-shaped kite.

She had told him once how she came to be called Anna. Her Chinese parents, newly settled in Bangkok, had chosen to name her after Anna Leonowens, the Englishwoman who'd journeyed to Siam in 1862 to instruct the king's many children. Crawford still called her that, though to the customers of her shop and the other merchants on the street she had long been Madame Wu.

No one ever used Crawford's given name either. When they arrived

together at the Pramane Ground, a large open space just north of the Grand Palace, she heard several men calling out, "Crawford!" He waved each time but did not stop, walking through the gathering crowd of spectators with Madame Wu at his side, striding purposefully, like the champion he was.

The Pramane Ground was used regularly for events as diverse as weekend markets and royal cremations, and every May the king himself inaugurated the planting season by sponsoring a ploughing ceremony on the site. But on these spring evenings when the south wind blew strong and free it was given over to the kite fights.

Madame Wu could not remember now the sequence of events that had propelled Crawford to the forefront in the sport. It had started in a bar, certainly, as had so many events in her life. A drunken challenge, a large bet made in haste, and then they had gone across to the open space by the palace. She remembered only one thing about that first evening. She had tugged at Crawford's sleeve and pointed across the street and said, "There is where Anna's second house stood, when she was governess for the king's children."

The battle in the sky was waged between two kites—a five-foot-long "male" kite in the shape of a star with a thick barbed string, and a much smaller "female" kite with a thin unbarbed string but a long tail able to ensnare the points of the star kite. The star kite could tangle or cut the smaller kite's string with its barbed cord and win, or it could lose the battle by being dragged to the ground by the smaller kite.

That first evening, Crawford flew a small kite, and he took naturally to the sport, maneuvering his kite so skillfully that the star kite was pulled ignominiously to the ground. But in the years that followed he had become an expert at flying both types. Whenever there was a challenger with money to bet, Crawford took him on. Now he mainly flew the larger star kites, often cutting through an opponent's string in a matter of minutes.

On this night, in a contest important enough for Madame Wu to have freed nine eels, Crawford was being challenged by a Pakistani youth who'd built a solid reputation in the sport since his recent arrival in Bangkok. Already she could see that the betting was heavy, and Crawford himself had wagered a large amount of cash on the outcome. Spectators were lining up, waving tight wads of money.

"Will you win?" she asked him, experiencing an uncharacteristic twinge of doubt.



He glanced around at the faces in the crowd, as he always did. "Why not? You freed your eels, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'll win," he said with a smile. "It is written in the heavens."

"You make fun of me now."

"After so many years? I would be a fool!"

She'd asked him once, years ago, why he always studied the faces in the crowd so carefully. "Because," he had replied, "someday someone will come to kill me." His answer had terrified her, and all that night she'd lain awake sobbing, unable to accept even the remote possibility of his death. She'd never asked him the question again, though he still gazed out at the gathering crowds each evening before a kite fight as if anticipating some danger that never arrived.

This evening the south wind was perfect, and the young Pakistani launched his kite easily while the crowd cheered. Many of them came, Madame Wu realized, hoping to see the American defeated. She'd told Crawford that once, but he didn't seem to mind. It only made the bets against him larger and increased his own winnings.

Now, gauging the wind by the movement of his opponent's kite, he released his own star kite and ran with the heavy barbed string until he could position it for the attack. For several minutes the rival kites maneuvered close to one another. Then the smaller kite managed to snare Crawford's star with its long tail. Madame Wu drew a sharp breath and waited while Crawford yanked his barbed string again and again. He had to get free quickly, before he could be dragged to earth.

Madame Wu thought of her eels flashing free through the lily-covered waters of the canal.

Then Crawford gave a final jerk to his kite string and the crowd cheered. He was free. Even those who had wagered against him applauded his skill. Madame Wu wanted to add her praise but she knew better than to speak to him during a match. There would be plenty of time to replay the details back at their apartment over the curio shop while he relaxed with a pipe.

Now there was still the match to be won. Crawford released more of his barbed string, and let the star kite climb gently with an updraft. His kite was positioned well above the challenger, in a near classic posture for attack. The heavy barbed string moved in, but the Pakistani still had a few tricks left. He sent his smaller kite into several dipping spins,

bringing it almost to the ground, each time managing to avoid the cutting barbs.

The kites maneuvered in the wind for another ten minutes before the end came quite quickly. Crawford saw his opportunity and took it, swooping down to loop his string around that of the smaller kite. Then he pulled it in and the barbs sliced easily through the Pakistani's string. The small kite, freed of its mooring, rose with the wind and drifted over the trees as the crowd cheered. Crawford allowed himself a slight smile as he began pulling in his own kite. Then he went around collecting on his bets as Madame Wu trailed behind.

Later, over drinks at a nearby outdoor nightclub, one of the other gamblers conceded, "Crawford, you're the best there is! You're better than any of these local lads, and better than the Pakistanis too." His name was Bates and he was a British merchant who often made big wagers on the kite fights.

Crawford smiled his sleepy smile and said, "It was Madame Wu's eels that did it for me. I'm a great believer in local customs."

"I can see that." Bates drained his glass and ordered another drink. "There's a young American in town," he said casually. "Have you met him yet?"

"Who would that be?" Crawford asked.

"His name's Michael Fleet. He says he was in Vietnam; like you were."

Crawford merely grunted. A great many young Americans had passed through Bangkok in the years he'd been there. But Madame Wu sensed there was some other purpose to the Englishman's inquiry. "What is so special about this American?" she asked.

Bates toyed with his empty glass while awaiting a refill. "He says he wants to learn kite fighting. I thought he might look you up."

"Maybe he will," Crawford conceded. He put down his glass and stood up. "Come on, Anna. It's time we were getting home."

"When will you be fighting again?" Bates wanted to know.

"When the south wind is right and the bets are big," Crawford picked up the star kite, which was leaning against the wall, and went out with Madame Wu behind him.

She carefully filled the long pipe and handed it to him as he lay on the bed. "What are you thinking of?" she asked.

"Lots of things. How it was back home—and in Vietnam."

Madame Wu took a deep breath. "You said once, a long time ago, that someday a man would come to kill you. Do you remember that?"

"I remember," he said.

"You are different tonight—since the Englishman mentioned this young American. Do you fear him?"

He turned away from her on the bed. "I don't want to talk about it now."

"Why would anyone come after all these years?"

"Some people have long memories," he said simply.

"Is that why you never went home to America?"

"That, and other reasons."

She sighed and changed the subject. "How much money did you win tonight?"

"About six thousand bahts," he said and turned back to her with a smile. "That's around three hundred American dollars. Very good for an hour's work."

She smiled too. It was very good. But it reminded her that she had not checked the day's receipts in the curio shop. "I will be back," she told him. He nodded and drew on his pipe.

Downstairs she went quickly about the task of counting the cash in the register and adding up the credit-card purchases. While she was working she happened to glance out the big front window and saw a man standing in the shadows across the street. Though she could not see his face, she thought he was watching the building.

When she went back to the apartment she did not mention the man to Crawford.

The following morning over breakfast she asked, "Why do we stay in Bangkok, Crawford? We could go to Australia and I could open a new shop there."

"Australia? What gave you that idea?"

"Perhaps it is time for a new beginning."

He grunted and sipped his coffee.

"I'd better go down and open the shop," she decided.

The sign over the front read MADAME WU'S CURIO EMPORIUM. Crawford had christened it that when she opened the place with money he'd supplied. She'd never asked him about the money, which somehow had come with him out of the jungles of Vietnam. She had learned long ago

to accept without question whatever life had to offer her.

But now there was a man waiting for her to open the shop. Instinctively she knew it was the man she'd seen in the shadows across the street last night. She tried to smile as she unlocked the door and said, "Come right in. We're open for business."

"Does Sidney Crawford live here?" he asked.

She studied his tanned face and saw a young, innocent expression that might have belonged to an angel in an old painting. Surely that face could hold no danger for Crawford. "Yes," she said. "He lives here. Who are you?"

"Name's Michael Fleet. Mike Fleet. I want to learn kite fighting."

She recognized the name as the one Bates had mentioned the previous evening. "Were you there last night?" she asked.

"I sure was! But afterward you all went off in a crowd to the nightclub and I didn't want to intrude. An Englishman named Bates said I should see Crawford. He said he's the best kite fighter in the city."

"I suppose he is," she admitted. "But why would you want to learn such a sport? It is not like boxing or *takraw* or sword duels, our more traditional sports. Some even say that kite fighting is only a game for boy-men who have never grown up."

"There's money in it. I won a hundred bahts myself last night, betting on Crawford!"

The idea of winning a five-dollar bet seemed to excite him so much that she knew she had to let him meet Crawford. His innocence was genuine. "Wait here," she told him, and disappeared into the back of the shop to climb the stairs to their apartment.

When she told Crawford he eyed her with suspicion. "It's the boy Bates mentioned," he said.

"Yes. He is harmless. He only wants to kite fight, to learn from the master. He won five dollars betting on you last night."

Crawford snorted. "He mustn't consider me much of a master if that's all he bet!" He buttoned his shirt and tucked it into his pants. "All right. Send him up."

But as she went back downstairs she saw him reach into the drawer where he kept his Beretta pistol beneath a pile of underwear.

Mike Fleet was twenty-six years old, a young man from California who'd gotten to Vietnam just as the Americans were withdrawing. "I

never did get to see enough of this part of the world," he told them when they'd welcomed him upstairs, "so I decided to stay over here and bum around for a few years."

"It's a long few years," Crawford pointed out. "The war ended in '75."

"Yeah. The time does pass quickly when you're havin' fun." For just an instant Madame Wu thought she saw the mask of innocence slip. Then it was back in place as the young American said, "I want to learn to kite fight like you, Mr. Crawford."

"I'm just Crawford here, son. And if you stay you'll just be Fleet. The locals don't have time for two names—not when they're making bets before a match."

"Then you'll teach me?"

Crawford eyed him for a moment before replying. "Maybe." He got to his feet. "Come on—I'll take you along to the Pramane Ground while I try out a new kite."

It was some time before Madame Wu could close her curio shop for an hour and join them. When she reached the open space north of the palace she saw that Crawford had turned the kite string over to Mike Fleet, who was guiding it well, listening while Crawford coached him on every movement.

As Madame Wu stood watching from the edge of the field she was joined by the Englishman, Bates. "I see that young American found Crawford."

"Yes," she replied. "He came to my shop this morning."

Bates nodded. "Seems like a nice chap."

Presently the two Americans ceased their sport and walked over to Madame Wu and the Englishman. "He's got the makings of a champ," Crawford conceded; patting the younger man on the shoulder. "Come back tomorrow, Fleet, and we'll put up both kites at once and spar a bit."

"You mean that?"

"I mean it."

Mike Fleet left with a grin on his face.

"Where do all these young Americans come from?" Bates wondered aloud. "What in God's name brings them to Bangkok? Is it drugs, or women, or what?"

"We have plenty of both," Crawford replied. "He sure didn't come all this distance to learn kite fighting."

Låter, back at the apartment, Madame Wu asked, "Do you want me to prepare your pipe?"

Crawford shook his head. "Not yet. Come here. I want to talk. I want to tell you about Vietnam."

"There is no need."

"I want you to know about it in case anything happens to me."

"Crawford—you will live forever!"

He laughed and took her in his arms. "I believed that myself once, when I was younger."

"All right," she agreed. "Tell me about it."

"When I was in the Army," he began, "in 1970, right before I came here and met you, I was given a great deal of American money and sent on a mission into the jungle. I was to meet a man and pay him to assassinate one of the North Vietnamese leaders. The assassination would have been carried out by powerful explosives which would also have killed a great many innocent people. It was war, they told me—and innocent people die all the time in war."

"I knew it was true. I'd seen a village destroyed by napalm just the week before. Well, I went off on my mission, but somewhere along the line I decided it was time for the killing to stop. I never met the man in the jungle. I crossed over into Cambodia and kept going until I reached Thailand. I moved along the coast, sometimes paying native fishermen to take me short distances by boat."

"But why would they want to kill you for that?" Madame Wu asked. "What you did was a good thing, not bad."

"That depends on how you look at it. I imagine there are people back home who figure I betrayed my country and lost the war all by myself."

"It was a long time ago, Crawford."

"Nearly ten years now," he agreed.

"Why are you telling me now? Because you fear this boy who has come looking for you?"

"He's no boy. He's twenty-six years old. Old enough to be a trained assassin."

"Why would they send a trained assassin when any one of a hundred persons in the crowd could kill you at a kite fight?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"And if you fear him so much, why have you agreed to teach him to kite fight?"

"Maybe I've got some crazy idea of winning him over. Maybe I figure if he gets to know me well enough he won't be able to kill me."

"And maybe you're wrong about him."

"We'll see," he said quietly.

They held a mock kite fight the following evening and though Crawford cut up the younger man's kite quite badly Fleet managed to stay in the contest for nearly an hour. Then they switched kites and Crawford demonstrated the techniques of soaring and gliding by which the smaller kite's long tail could be used to entangle the star points of the larger kite. The young man learned fast, with an intensity Madame Wu could only admire.

But at the end of the evening she had a question for Fleet while Crawford gathered up the fallen kites. "The other morning when you came to my shop—I saw you watching it the night before."

"Yes," he admitted. "I was trying to work up my courage. Finally I decided to wait till morning."

"I see."

"He's a great man, Crawford is."

"I think so," Madame Wu said. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to him."

"You speak English quite well," Fleet observed, studying her closely for the first time. "Did Crawford teach you?"

"The Americans taught me. Crawford was the last of many, but the most important one. After Crawford, I want no more teachers."

"What about this man Bates?"

"He was a doctor once, but when he came here a few years back he was a merchant, employed by a British company. He doesn't talk much about his past. No one does in Bangkok."

"Does Crawford?"

Her eyes searched his face. "He talks to me. Why do you wonder?"

Mike Fleet shrugged. "I don't know. I asked him about Vietnam and he changed the subject. Hell, we were both there! I thought he'd want to talk about it."

"Some things are better left in the past."

Bates had appeared from somewhere to speak with Crawford and when they parted Crawford came over with the kites to where Fleet and Madame Wu stood waiting. "Bates says the Pakistani wants a rematch."

"Will you give him one?" Fleet wanted to know.

"It's customary. One rematch—like in championship boxing."

"When?" Madame Wu asked.

"Tomorrow evening."

"I will need to free more eels."

Crawford's eyes twinkled. "What's the matter? The last batch run out of steam already?"

"For the major kite fights a new ritual is needed."

He smiled at Fleet. "I taught her everything I know about business but she still can't face a decision or a kite fight without releasing her eels."

"She's a fine woman," the younger man said. "I wish I could find one half as good in this city."

"There are new ones arriving every day from the rural areas. Some say there might be as many as two hundred thousand prostitutes in Bangkok."

Fleet blushed at his words. "I don't mean a prostitute."

Crawford turned to Madame Wu. "Tell him what you were when I found you, Anna."

She sucked in her breath and said, very quietly, not looking at either of them, "I was a bar hostess at the Café of Floating Lights. Crawford took me away from that and set me up in business."

"You're a lucky man, Crawford. With a woman like this I wouldn't have gone back home either."

"Let's hope you find one," Crawford said.

They parted then, and Madame Wu fell into step beside Crawford. "What do you think of him?" she asked.

Crawford pondered a moment. Then he said simply, "I think he's been sent to kill me."

Over breakfast the next morning Crawford made plans for the day. "I need to fix up the kite a bit for tonight. Fleet will be there and I have to put on a good show for him."

"Even if he plans to kill you?"

"I could be wrong. Maybe he's as innocent as you think. Anyway, I can't go through the rest of my life looking over my shoulder."

She went downstairs to the shop with him. He needed to buy more heavy kite string so she unlocked the door to let him out. It was not yet nine o'clock, and the little street of shops was still nearly deserted. As



he stood in the doorway she heard something like a muffled cough. He stepped back into the shop and slammed the door. He was holding his side and when he took his hand away Madame Wu saw the blood.

"Crawford—what is it?" She tried to keep her voice calm, though her heart was racing.

"Someone just took a shot at me from across the street. Either he used a silencer or it was a small-caliber target pistol."

"Did you see anyone?" she asked, pulling away his shirt to expose the wound.

"No. Don't bother with that. It just grazed me."

"You're bleeding. You need stitches."

"He's a damned lousy shot."

"Lucky for you! I must get you to a doctor."

"No. A little tape will close the wound."

"You will bleed to death!" She was insistent now. Though there was not much blood, his face was very pale.

She helped him upstairs and brought some tape, but after an examination of the wound in a mirror he was forced to agree with her. "All right," he said. "Call Bates. He used to be a doctor."

"Why not go to a hospital?"

"I'd just as soon the word didn't get around quite yet. Right now, whoever tried to kill me doesn't know how badly I'm hurt. That could be an advantage for the next few hours."

She tried Bates's number three times before he answered. When his voice finally came on the line she said, "Mr. Bates, someone tried to kill Crawford. Could you come here right away, please?"

"What? How badly is he hurt?"

"Not too bad, I think."

"I'll be right over."

When she hung up she started thinking about the eels. Now, it seemed, they were more important than ever. It was no longer merely a kite fight that was at stake, but Crawford's life.

She went to him and said, "When Bates comes I must go out for some eels."

He tried to laugh, but she could see he was in pain.

"Is it bad, Crawford?"

"A scrape. I'll be good as new."

She went downstairs to wait for Bates. When he arrived he was carrying

a small black medical bag she'd never seen before. For the first time she believed the story that he had been a doctor once.

"Who shot him?" he demanded.

"We don't know. We saw no one. Go up to him, Bates, and patch his wound. I must do some shopping, but I will be back."

She made her way down the street, past the other shops that were just opening their doors. The morning mist was burning off early and the sun would quickly warm the air.

At the great outdoor market there was no sign of the boy who sold the eels, and for a moment she panicked. Then she saw him across the field near one of the dried-up canals. He had a pushcart full of brown plastic bags that seemed to writhe even as she watched. "Quickly, boy!" she called out. "Sell me nine eels for luck!"

Clutching her purchase close, feeling the eels move against her as if anxious for their coming freedom, she was tempted to go immediately to the Klong Maha Nak. But then something stirred in her memory. Something dangerous.

Crawford was in danger.

She hurried back to the shop, still clutching the plastic bag. She climbed the stairs to the kitchen and listened.

Bates and Crawford were talking in the bedroom. The Englishman laughed about something and then came out to the kitchen with his black bag.

He saw Madame Wu by the table and smiled. "He'll be as good as new. I took a couple of stitches and taped him up well."

"That's fine."

"I'll go now," he said. "Let him get a bit of rest."

"Mr. Bates—"

"Yes?"

"When you arrived you asked who shot Crawford. But on the phone I only told you someone tried to kill him. How did you know it was by shooting?"

"I—"

"I think it was you, Mr. Bates, hiding across the street when he came out this morning."

"What? What are you talking about?" His black bag had come open and he was reaching inside.

Madame Wu saw the bread knife on the table, just out of reach. She

knew she had made a terrible mistake. Even as she tried to speak again, Bates raised the silenced pistol and fired three times.

Crawford opened his eyes. Bates was coming back into the room. "What was that noise?" Crawford asked.

Then he saw the gun in the Englishman's hand. It was a hit man's weapon—a .22 caliber target pistol with a silencer.

"I had to kill her, Crawford, so I might as well finish you off too. I can make it look as if you killed each other."

"It was you across the street this morning!"

"Yes," Bates said, raising the pistol until Crawford was looking down the barrel. "You always knew someone would come, didn't you?"

"You came three years ago. Why did you wait so long?"

"My position was too safe here. I didn't want to jeopardize it with a foolish killing. Once I knew it was you I spent some time trying to find out what you did with the money."

"It's downstairs in the curio shop."

"I know that now."

"What business is it of yours whether I live or die?"

Bates shrugged. "None, personally. It wasn't my war, after all. But I'm an arms merchant, selling to various factions in Southeast Asia. There are people who still remember you—who say you lost the war. They told me I had to kill you if I wanted to stay in business. So I waited for the right opportunity—the appearance of a young American I could pin it on. That's why I patched you up when Madame Wu phoned. It wouldn't do to kill you here, where Fleet might not be blamed. I planned to have another try tonight after the kite fight. She forced my hand—so now you'll die together."

"Wait—" Crawford began, trying to rise from the bed.

"I'll miss you, Crawford," Bates said, his finger whitening on the trigger. "I won a great deal of money on you."

That was when Madame Wu plunged the bread knife into his back.

"You made a terrible mess," Crawford told her. "There's blood all over the place."

Madame Wu sat trembling in the chair while they waited for the police.

"I never killed anyone before. Is that what it's like?"

"That's what it's like. You saved my life, Anna."

"It was the eels," she told him. "I was holding them to my chest when he shot me. The bullets knocked me over, but they hit the eels."

"I guess I'll never doubt you again when you say that they bring good luck."

"Will there be others like Bates who come to kill you?"

"Perhaps."

"What will you do now?"

He touched his side and winced. "I may not be able to handle the kite this evening. I'll have to see if young Fleet can carry on for me."



*Who says that crime doesn't pay? . . .*

# BORN VICTIM

by  
**JEFFRY  
SCOTT**



**T**rapped here, freedom lost, I feel not a tinge of regret. It won't last forever, my captivity, and Arnie Pressmann is out of the game for good. So who says crime doesn't pay? .

How I loathed that man! Hatred so keen, so potent, that it sparkled on the palate like driest, savage wine. Some people might be horrified at discovering a lethal beast within themselves; it elated me.

I've always been a desk man, you see. Timid, if anything. Neutral,

BORN VICTIM

95

colorless—I have no vanity, few illusions. Bad eyesight kept me out of contact sports at school, the service in adulthood. I had never knowingly harmed another living creature.

Six months of Arnie Pressmann forced me to shift up through the gears of civilization until murder was my obvious and logical goal—a need as intolerably demanding as that of an addict for his drug.

Funnily enough, I liked the man when he joined the company. We all did, especially the women. He was a big, confident fellow, glowing with good health and apparent bonhomie. The very sight of him, as we shared the elevator that first morning, coaxed a rare smile out of me.

“What’s the joke?” he demanded sharply, transforming himself in a split second into a total stranger topping and outweighing me, a stranger with a grievance.

I stammered something, my words dying as he grinned. He was always playing such games, beckoning one on to the greased staircase, the missing rung.

The incident upset me and his handshake, deliberately cruel, didn’t help. Yet a moment afterward, walking up the corridor, Arnie won me over again with a few casual words, an implicit, hypnotizing assumption of fellowship.

“Looks like a funeral parlor,” he muttered with a wink as I waved him ahead into the outer offices.

Old Chilvers, the boss, was standing there. His face lit up and he hurried forward, pumping Pressmann’s hand. “Arnie, welcome! Well, what d’you think of the place?”

“I think it’s fine, chief,” Pressmann boomed. Then—oh, it was masterfully done—he glanced at me, made to say something, and very evidently changed his mind.

Chilvers’ eyebrows went up. Arnie Pressmann chuckled and slapped my shoulder. “Hank thinks the place could use some brightening, but it’s all fine by me.” He strode forward, taking Chilvers with him.

Later, I realized that behind the laughter and virility, the bluff outdoorsman persona, Pressmann was about as ingenuous and impulsive as a computer. He’d weighed everything up, decided that I was the main obstacle to his progress in a company whose leadership would be vacant within three years—old Chilvers was fretting for retirement—and set about eliminating me.

Nobody else saw it though. Luckily, I’ve always been the onlooker

seeing most of the game, myopia or no. So I dissembled (splendid antique word, inherited from my grandfather), and Arnie no doubt thought me a simpleton.

That or a worm. Forgetting that worms turn.

There were factors on my side. Arnie Pressmann had charisma, whatever that means, but in business and administrative terms he wasn't very good. He could lose convincingly when playing golf with Chilvers, flatter him, get the whole office on his side, but that was the limit of his achievements.

Old Chilvers began sensing that quite soon. His tone was apologetic when asking me to fix Pressmann's messes, regain ground lost by him, tie ends left flapping at three-hour lunches. In his eyes was a trace of sheepishness. Silently, he was saying, Listen, I know the guy's a liability, but . . .

The best of it was that I never let my feelings show. Arnie—even the name puckers my lips like raw lemon—Arnie might have escaped and the world been unaware but for what happened. It certainly stunned the office.

In fact, though the very thought of him was salt on a psychic wound, I had banished all the rage to a remote dungeon in my mind. It was plain that when Chilvers retired I had to be the successor.

I grew into the routine of nodding, smiling, and acting overtly eager to help in Arnie Pressmann's presence.

Then, with less than a year to go before Chilvers' retirement, things changed. Suddenly, Chilvers was friendlier than ever to Pressmann. Never a morning passed without him dropping by the oaf's office to chat and joke. The Chilvers arm was often about the Pressmann shoulders.

It was a sickening shock to me. Somehow Pressmann had wooed the old fool. Chilvers meant to hand over to him: It was obvious enough for the secretaries to gossip about the matter.

"They couldn't do that, Hank!" my secretary, Jeannie, blurted out.

"Well," I said, all judiciousness and nobility, "Arnie's got a lot of personality and drive, you know. He's probably what the firm needs."

Jeannie gave me an odd look. "Meaning you'll just roll over and let him stomp over you?"

I shrugged and spread my hands. "The race goes to the fittest, dear. I'm sure Irwin Chilvers will make the right decision."

She went red and banged out of the office. Her reaction delighted me.

When the men from Homicide came asking questions, my harmless credentials would be long established.

From that morning, Arnie Pressmann was doomed. And though I wasn't aware of it—I expect would-be murderers never are—my own freedom was doomed as well.

Days passed. Emotions were masked and the right things were said. A .38 pistol was bought out of state, there were a few hours of inept target practice, an alibi was concocted, and the execution night chosen.

When the door opened and he stood there, even in the midst of heart-bursting stress and fear, I was aware of the cliché element in our talk.

"You! What d'you want?"

"Let's cut this short. Stay away from the phone. This is a gun." (Well, of course it was. Either that, or a ludicrously dangerous form of paper-weight.)

"You—you've come to kill me?" The words throbbed with a sense of outraged injustice. "In God's name, *why?*"

"You know why! I've put everything into getting that job, I'm the right man for it. And all the time you're there sneering and plotting, making sure you cut me out. No way, you bastard, no way!"

And then the shots, doors slamming, giant doors that deafened. The end of it. No more . . .

For a while. I recovered in hospital, and soon I'll be out of the Intensive Care Unit. Perhaps three months will see me back at my desk.

Arnie Pressmann, for once, had seen more of the game than I. He detected that old Chilvers was being extra friendly because he felt unable to promote Arnie, as he'd half promised to do when inviting him to join the firm.

Pressmann will get a relatively short term for attempted murder, but his business career is finished. When they allow me home, the first thing I must do is flush that little packet of poison down the toilet. I'd meant to sneak it into his drink at the singles bar he frequented, but I was still nourishing my hatred to take that final, awful step when Pressmann made his move.

I repeat: who says that crime doesn't pay? And once in a while, the victim benefits.



*The fish was worth \$50,000 in prize money alone . . .*



by **BETTY REN WRIGHT**

I heard my brother-in-law's car coming through the woods before I saw it, and I thought, Maybe my bad-luck days—no, *years*—are over. I never expected to be glad to see Joe, but he couldn't have timed his arrival any better.

Of course; I knew he'd show up sooner or later. He always came out to see us toward the end of our two weeks at Lake Pepper, because he worried about whether Ron might have caught the Big One. That's what

they called it—the Big One—probably the largest muskie that ever lived. Every fisherman in northern Wisconsin knew it was somewhere in Lake Pepper. Half of them claimed to have seen it at one time or another and any one of them would have sold his soul to catch it. Both Ron and Joe spent every spare moment pursuing it. The fish was one of the reasons they had bought the cottage, long before Ron and I were married.

“Where’s Ron, Barbara?” The social graces were tools Joe used when he wanted something; otherwise, he ignored them. That was one of the many characteristics—a dreary list—he shared with my husband.

“He’s lying down,” I said. “He got overexcited, said he was having pains in his chest again. He thought he’d better rest before going into town.”

“Overexcited?” Joe repeated suspiciously. “Why is he overexcited? Why is he going into town?”

Instead of answering, I motioned to him to follow me into the cottage.

“I used to think it was silly for us to have such a big freezer,” I said. “But I’ll never say that again.” I opened the heavy lid of the freezer and stood back to watch his face. There haven’t been many bright spots in my marriage, and none at all in being related to Joe. But that moment made up for a lot. He looked as if he were going to cry.

“I don’t believe it,” he said finally, his voice not much more than a croak.

“Seventy-eight inches,” I told him. “Seventy-nine pounds—we weighed it on the bathroom scale. It’s the Big One, all right.”

I let the lid drop, but he went on staring at the shining white surface as if he could see right through it. “Fifty thousand dollars,” he whispered. “It’s good for that in prize money alone.”

“Plus commercials and endorsements,” I reminded him. “And who knows how many gifts from bait companies and boat manufacturers and—well, you know what it will be like. It’s not surprising that the excitement made him sick. But he’ll feel better after he rests a while. Then we’ll drive into town and register it, and the fun will start.”

I knew exactly how much Joe hated what I was saying, because I knew how Ron would feel if the situation were reversed. They were mean-minded men, the two of them, who never could be happy for anyone else’s good fortune. Most of all they were jealous of each other, resentful of whatever the other had. That was why Joe had tried on a number of occasions to get me to have an affair with him. It wasn’t that he found

me irresistible—it was just that I was Ron's wife. He had practically admitted it.

"You look as if you need a drink," I said cheerfully. I *felt* cheerful, and not just because of the fifty thousand dollars in the freezer. I was enjoying Joe's misery, just as he would have enjoyed Ron's if he had had the opportunity.

He finished one drink and then another. After the second, I moved to the couch next to him and put my hand on his. "It's mostly luck, you know. Don't feel so bad."

"What the hell difference does it make whether it's luck or not?" he snarled. "He's going to get all the glory. They're going to call him the greatest muskie man in the country and he's never going to let me forget it." His face crumpled.

I ignored his venom. "I only wish Ron felt well enough to enjoy it the way he should," I said. "He doesn't have your good health, Joe. This summer he's been complaining constantly about chest pains, but he refuses to see a doctor."

I watched his face carefully. When I was a teenager my daddy used to say, "Bad luck is more than just that, baby. You don't make the most of your opportunities." And he was right, I didn't. While I played hard to get the boy I liked invited my closest friend to the prom. When I dyed my hair auburn and it turned a kind of copper-green I moped around the house all summer waiting for it to grow out. My friend, the one who stole my boy friend, dyed her hair at the same time, and it turned copper-green too. But she didn't stay home. Not her. She went to Milwaukee to visit a cousin and I found out later that she told everybody there she had dyed her hair that color on purpose. She made such a name for herself that by the end of her visit half the girls she'd met had copper-green hair too. "Play your cards," my daddy always said. "You just aren't playing your cards, baby."

Well, I thought, my daddy would be proud of me now. I have a marked deck, and I'm making the most of it. Because it was obvious what was going on in Joe's mind. The drinks and the envy were laying out a scenario for him. He had a sick brother who had the Big One. And the sick brother's wife was being friendlier than she'd ever been before.

"I've got an idea," he said thickly. And I thought, I'll just bet you have, brother-in-law.

He explained the idea to me in a whisper, hesitantly at first, but with

growing excitement as he saw how good it might be. Ron was probably seriously ill. He might die before he'd half realized all the possible rewards from catching the Big One. How did I feel about that? Didn't I think it would have been better if the fish had been caught by a healthy person who could put a lot of energy into making it pay off?

"Someone like you?" I asked, and he nodded, his eyes full of whisky cleverness.

"With the right partner, of course," he said. "I've always been in love with you, Barb. You know that. What a life we could have together!"

"You and me and the Big One," I said.

He gave me a terrible smile and pointed at a spot above the mantel. "With the Big One over our fireplace," he said. "Our good-luck charm—all seventy-eight inches of him."

I poured us each a drink and carried mine out to the front porch. "I'm going down to the shore for a while," I told him. "We can talk about it later—if there's anything to talk about."

He nodded gravely, a little tipsily. "There will be," he said.

I walked down to the pier and sat there thinking about the way things were. I did wish my daddy had lived to see this day and how I was handling things. He might have called me his good-luck girl for a change.

When Joe joined me about ten minutes later he was very pale, with glittering eyes and high spots of color on his cheekbones. I knew the signs—I'd seen them often in my husband. In moments of high excitement—those times when he'd cheated someone without getting caught or had put down an enemy—fever bloomed in his face.

"It's over," he said hoarsely. "He's dead. He never even woke up."

I stood and let him put his arm around me, and we walked back to the cottage. "You'd better call Dr. Jensen," I said. "And the sheriff."

"The sheriff!" he exclaimed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"For the ambulance, silly. They'll take him to the hospital to verify your diagnosis."

He agreed, finally, but insisted on another look at the Big One before making the calls. I watched as he lifted the lid of the freezer and marveled at the difference in his expression as he looked inside this time. The fish was his now, and he could enjoy it.

"I want to get this registered fast," he said. "It's going to shrink a little in the freezer and I don't want to lose an ounce." He stroked the gleaming

length with one finger. "We'll be rich!" he said. "I guarantee it. I'll have guys coming here from all over the country wanting to know how it's done. Maybe I'll quit my job and be a guide. Seventy-five bucks a day to go out with the man who caught the biggest muskie in the world." I could see he'd been busy making plans even while he was taking the necessary step to make them come true.

While he made the phone calls I went into the bedroom. Ron looked as if he were sleeping, curled on his side the way he always did. The big down pillow, usually scrunched into a corner of the boudoir chair, was neatly plumped out, but otherwise it was just our bedroom—an unlikely setting for a murder. I saluted my husband, who would bully me no more, and went back to the kitchen, where Joe was completing his calls.

They were businesslike and kind at the hospital. "He died in his sleep," Dr. Jensen said. "I don't think we'll even think about an autopsy as long as you say he's been complaining of frequent chest pains, Barbara." He nodded sympathetically when I told him how often I'd asked Ron to have a checkup. Joe, eager to help, said he had been pushing Ron to have a checkup too.

"It was the excitement," I said, wiping my eyes. "It was more than he could take."

Joe shook his head in a fierce warning, but I dried my widow's tears and kept talking. "It was the Big One, Dr. Jensen—the monster muskie everyone's been after for years. When Ron saw what was on the line he nearly went crazy. I said to him, 'Darling, calm down,' but he couldn't, I guess. He'd waited so long."

Dr. Jensen was a muskie man himself. "You mean," he said slowly, "you mean Ron actually caught the Big One?"

Joe closed his eyes.

"No," I said, watching my brother-in-law. "Ron didn't catch it. I did. Right off the end of our pier. With the rod and reel he gave me for a wedding present." I smiled bravely at them both. "I used it on our honeymoon—we went fishing, you know—and today was the first time I've touched it since."

We went down the hall to the solarium and I told them how it had happened—how Ron had been sitting at the end of the pier going over his tackle and I had wandered down to join him, totally depressed at the prospect of still another day alone in the cottage while he was out on the

lake. How I'd picked up a lure at random, fastened it to the leader, and cast—just once.

"Just once?" Dr. Jensen repeated flatly. He had obviously forgotten for the moment why we had come to the hospital.

"I played the fish for nearly an hour, and it never broke water until I had it right up to the pier. Then it made a couple of fast turns right on the surface and we realized what I had. Ron grabbed the net and helped me bring it in. I—I suppose it was too much for him, lifting seventy-nine pounds of fighting fish."

At that point Dr. Jensen was paged and he left us, reluctantly. I was alone with Joe, who hadn't said a word while I told my story.

"You're lying!" he whispered hoarsely. "Admit it, damn you."

"I'm telling the truth," I assured him. "It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not. It is the truth."

"But why did you—" He stopped, his face contorted, and I might have been afraid of him if we weren't sitting in the sunny solarium of a busy hospital, and if I didn't know he was running scared.

"Why did I what?" I asked. "I haven't done a thing, Joe, and if you keep your mouth closed no one will ever wonder what *you* did. Remember that."

He glared at me, his mouth working. "You're not telling everything," he snarled. "Ron would never have dropped that fish in the freezer and gone to take a nap. He'd have wanted everyone on God's earth to see what he—"

"What *he* caught," I finished for him. "Yes, I did leave out a little bit of the story when Dr. Jensen was with us. A grieving widow doesn't like to speak ill of the dead. You see, I caught that fish at eight o'clock this morning. For the next three hours Ron tried to convince me that we should say he caught it. He tried everything." I pushed up my sleeves so he could see the bruises forming on my arms. "When I wouldn't agree, he started to drink. The more he drank, the louder—and meaner—he got. Finally, he just passed out."

Joe was silent for a long time. I could almost feel sorry for him as he watched the fifty thousand dollars, the paid endorsements, the gifts, and the glory slipping out of his reach. I could even tell the exact moment when he decided that maybe all was not lost.

"Back at the cottage," he said, with more diffidence than I would have thought possible, "we talked about—you know—the future. Ron was no

good for you, but I love you, Barbara.” He tried to smile. “And you could use a husband who can show you how to turn that fish into a fortune.”

I smiled back with no effort at all. “When we talked at the cottage, Ron was alive,” I said. “I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life with him, and now I don’t have to. I’m going to enjoy living alone—just little old Barbara and all that money.”

He looked at me with an odd mixture of admiration and loathing. “You let me kill him for nothing,” he said wonderingly. “You couldn’t even wait for those chest pains to get him.”

“What chest pains?” I asked, and got out of there fast.

The funeral was the next afternoon, in a thunderstorm that threatened to drown out the minister as he tried to find something good to say about my deceased husband. The cemetery was under three inches of water, and the wind and rain continued through the brief graveside service. It seemed appropriate to me—this stormy ending to the worst years of my life. Tomorrow, I thought, the sun will be shining and the good times will begin.

I decided that I ought to wait a day or two before picking up the Big One and bringing it back to town, even if it meant there would be some shrinkage before the weight was officially recorded. Grieving widows don’t worry about setting muskie records, I told myself.

The second day after the funeral I almost drove out to the lake, but the girls from my bridge club arrived in a group to keep up my spirits, and, what with cards and Scotch, the visit didn’t end till after five. The following morning my attorney called and asked me to come to his office. We went to the bank together to open the safety deposit box. Ron had left practically nothing, it turned out, and I could see the attorney wondered why I wasn’t more concerned.

You’ll know soon enough, I thought, visualizing the Big One on the front page of the paper. That night I dreamed I was the cover girl for *Sports Illustrated* and that the Big One was the centerfold for *Fishing Facts*. It was a pleasant dream and, as it turned out, the last good one for bad-luck Barbara.

It was Saturday afternoon before I got out to the cottage. There was an electric-company truck turning out of our road as I turned in.

“Trouble?” I asked.

The driver nodded. "All O.K. now, missus. Our troubleshooter reported no juice on this shore late Monday night, but we had so many calls in town after that rainstorm Tuesday that we're just getting around to the lake cottages." He scratched a very bristly chin. "Wasn't any storm that caused the trouble out here though. Funny business—somebody cut the wires right back of your place. Good thing you wasn't stayin' out here, huh?"

He drove on, that cheery doer of good works, and I just sat there, letting what he had told me sink in. After a while I realized that there was no point in driving in to the cottage. I have a good imagination, and I just wasn't ready to face seventy-nine pounds of muskie that had been in a turned-off freezer for nearly a week. No one else would want to look at it either. They might even figure it had died of old age and I'd found it on the beach.

"Shame on you, baby," my daddy would have said. "Missed your chance again. What's the matter with you, girl?"

I didn't know the answer. It was a joke, really—the biggest fish story of all time. Sitting there in the quiet woods, I could almost hear Joe laughing.





*With this particular attaché case, Tim felt unbeatable . . .*



Tim Baker hadn't heard so much shooting since World War II, nor so much clash and bang of metal. It was coming down the road toward him fast, the roar of engines and the squeal of tires adding to the din. Like a movie chase scene, he thought in a flash.

He was crouched in front of the rear-view mirror of his ancient Dart, shaving. Foam was still thick under his nose and the saucepan of hot water in his left hand spilled a little as the racket crescendoed nearer.

He put the pan down, dropped the razor in it, and started scrambling up the ten feet of bank to the edge of the road above. When he got eye level with the road some damn thing nearly tore his head off and he ducked reflexively. He felt the rip of air as the jamboree thundered by and watched entranced as two mean-looking, shiny black cars, side by side, went hurtling down the sloping stretch of Route 70, banging and shooting at each other like a couple of armed, hip-checking hockey players, and on around the bend below, gunfire still peppering the early morning air as they disappeared.

"Wow!" Baker said and delicately tested the top of his sparsely haired head where whatever-it-was had damn near scalped him. He slid back down the dirt bank on the seat of his pants and spotted whatever-it-was—a black, boxy-looking thing at rest on the opposite bank of the little brook alongside which he'd spent the night.

Wheels that hadn't turned in his head for years, the wheels of avarice, began to whirr like humming birds. There was nothing dumb about Tim Baker and he was still snake-quick except for the bum left ankle, which at that point began to remind him it was still there and had been roundly abused. "Damn!" he said as it folded painfully beneath his weight.

At the bottom of the slope he one-handed his way around the front end of the car and hopped to the edge of the brook, which was about five feet across and shallow enough for a baby to traverse on its hands and knees. The whatever-it-was—now clearly an attaché case—was resting at the base of a manzanita bush. Baker had it in his hands in almost less time than it takes to tell.

Now, whoever heard of an attaché case flung out of a fast-moving car that was being chased and shot at that wasn't full of—what? The possibilities raced through Baker's mind. He was as much a TV addict as the next sixty-six-year-old retiree. Packets of hundred-dollar bills, soft cham-  
ois bags full of jewels, bearer bonds, boxes of neatly stacked Krugerrands. Or, with my luck, he thought, dirty shirts. But you don't go to war over dirty shirts. And besides, the case was far too heavy for that.

His mind, still racing at high speed, reconstructed the scene of a moment ago, saw again the careening cars, the blue-and-white Nevada plates on both—neither of them, he deduced, a cop's car. Some kind of a gang dust-up, his thumping heart told him; and one of them, the winner, would be back soon.

He tossed the powerfully built attaché case back across the brook and

crawled after it. From the picnic table a thoughtful county had provided he picked up the ancient Sterno cooking unit on which he'd boiled his shaving and coffee water, got his bedroll, and put the whole works in the trunk of the Dart. Then he got in, fired the ignition, eased the rattling heap up the rutted, gravelly lane to the pavement above, and took off as fast as the aging slant-six would take him, one eye glued on the rear-view mirror for signs of pursuit.

It was quarter to seven of a bright clear Thursday morning.

"The thing is," Martha had said the previous morning, "if you take care of those pants they'll last the two days you're gone. Besides, you don't have another decent pair, so you've got no choice." She stepped back and surveyed him, standing in the middle of their bedroom floor. "The shirt looks good," she said, "and there's a spare one in your bag. And don't forget to change your underwear."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," Baker had said sullenly. He wanted no part of this project, had no idea what he was doing. But he did know clearly that there was no way the two of them could live on \$252 a month any more, which was what they got from Social Security. "Dioplexythorozide"; he mouthed the word in his mind, sure he had it wrong again. But it was something like that—dio something and plexy something. He'd studied the literature on the stuff for three days now, but it had all flown through his head like a flock of birds, leaving no trace. And now he was supposed to go out and sell it to a bunch of foxy farmers, because—whatever-it-was-called—it was supposed to be good for their cattle feed, brace it up, make it last longer. It was all in the literature. Martha had tears in her eyes, but Martha always had tears in her eyes when he was about to go somewhere. She stepped up and hugged him and she felt good and warm against his skinny chest.

"You can do it, Tim," she said. "Mr. Thomas is sure you can do it."

Mr. Thomas was the guy who owned the plant down in the valley that turned the stuff out. It was a new kind of thing and Martha had heard at the beauty shop that they were looking for a man to sell the stuff to the ranchers up in the hills and over the state line in Nevada. Straight commission plus mileage.

"How much mileage?" Baker had asked in Thomas's office.

"Fifteen cents a mile," Mr. Thomas had said.

"No way!"

"Well, how about fifteen?"

"How about twenty? You bought any gas lately?"

They settled on eighteen and Mr. Thomas had given Baker a batch of literature to hand out and two dozen three-pound bags of the stuff as samples. It was going great guns down in the valley, Mr. Thomas had said, and if Tim worked his territory right he could make damn fine money.

Baker didn't ask Mr. Thomas why he had to get his salesmen through a network of hairdressers, because he really had no choice in the matter. With his ankle, there were few things he could do to earn a buck and, besides, up where they'd retired—where the air at least was cool and clean—there were few jobs of any kind. So he'd agreed.

Thoryplexydiozene, he thought, not really wanting to part from the bounteous warmth of Martha's breast, but she broke his grip and went over to the bureau and got out some cash.

"Twenty dollars for a motel tonight," she said, "and fifteen for eats. I've packed you a good lunch and you've already had breakfast, so you've only got to buy four meals—is fifteen dollars enough? You can take a sack of apples too, so you don't get bound up from driving."

"Fifteen's plenty," he said. "But I'd better take another fifteen for gas." It almost killed him to total it all up—nearly one-fifth of what they had to live on each month.

"You'll earn it back," she said, her eyes still wet.

He spent half that first day lost in the hills—some of the ranchers lived five miles from their mailboxes on the highway—and the other half getting turned down cold. For the sake of convenience and sanity, Baker had dubbed the stuff TXY, or sometimes XYT. One rancher, rolling the pellets of a sample bag between a gnarled thumb and finger, said he might just possibly try an order of the stuff next year, or the year after.

And he'd wasted one hour fixing a flat.

He didn't think the Dart would make it over the summit at Beckwourth Pass in one try, so after he bought a hamburger in Quincy for his supper that first evening and a box of Twinkies for his breakfast he began looking for a spot to pull off the road and spend the night. No way would he fork over twenty bucks for a motel room. He had a better use for the money than that.

He'd sneaked his bedroll into the car when Martha wasn't looking, plus

the Sterno outfit and a few other odds and ends. He figured to hit Reno between calls with about twenty-five bucks' play money, and that thought alone kept him going through the day. He had a feeling about Reno, even though he'd never been there to test it out. His heart beat faster when he thought about Reno and his fingers twitched like a thief's. He'd played a lot of blackjack in the service, and sometimes with the boys on the job, and he had a knack for the game. He knew he could come home from Reno a winner if he just gave himself the chance and had a little backup money. It was very important to have backup money.

The temperature-gauge needle had been on "H" for three miles and the steam had begun to hiss out through the seams of the hood, so he pulled off the road a mile and a half short of the summit. He got out and lifted the hood and looked carefully back down the long straight stretch of road behind him. But he saw nothing. No shiny black cars. He'd seen only a couple of school buses and a half dozen dusty old pickups in the ten miles he'd come, so there'd really been no good reason to push the slant-six so hard, but his good right foot hadn't listened to reason.

He hobbled to the rear of the car and lifted the trunk lid, noting at once, with a jolt of the heart, that he'd left the saucepan with the razor in it behind. But there was the attaché case, looking fatter and richer than ever. He checked the road again for traffic and then set the case up on its spine; seeing for the first time the three small but powerful-looking padlocks sealing the lid shut. Three of them! With three different keys, probably, he thought. His mind soared giddily at the sight.

It had all the thrilling romance of a Captain Kidd treasure map torn in three parts, with three guys searching the world over for each other to put it all together—or, in this case, to open the locks—and then, in the tradition of free-booters since the year one, a round-robin fight to see who survived with it all. The last two of them had been battling their way down a road a while ago, and the winner of that round would come back and find the saucepan and razor, the water still warm, and then start looking for a guy with a half shaved face.

Baker's heart thumped in his chest and he slammed the trunk lid, hobbled around to the front of the car, and helplessly watched the steam still hissing from the radiator. Then he leaned against the fender and let the rising morning sun dry his wet pants. The crook would look for that too—a guy with wet pants . . .

Baker had a ten showing and a deuce in the hole. He refused a hit and the dealer laid a king on the man to Baker's left. It would have busted Baker. The dealer had a nine showing and Baker had smelled a three or four down. The dealer turned the card—it was a four—and dealt himself a queen, going bust; and Baker won another two bucks. He'd beaten the dealer nine out of fourteen times, betting two bucks each time. He was excited, getting the feel of the game. He bet four dollars on the next hand, won it, and let the eight dollars ride, losing it to the dealer's ace-king, a blackjack. Then he went back to two bucks a game and won five in a row.

He picked up his chips and went out to the parking lot to check on the Dart again.

One thing about a heap that old, he knew nobody would ever bother to swipe it.

Unless they knew what was in it.

He looked around suspiciously, wishing he'd worn his dark glasses, wishing he knew what was in it himself.

It was four o'clock, the sun still high in the sky, the Thursday afternoon crowd in the casinos along Virginia Street still thin. He'd gotten into town a little after one and stopped first at a filling station for water and gas and to get the flat fixed. After he'd nursed the car over the summit, from where it was downhill almost all the way to Reno, he'd called on two ranchers, not hoping to sell anything—he knew his limits there—but to see if there was a big black bullet-riddled car on his tail. But there wasn't, and he'd started to breathe easy again.

He ran his hand innocently over the hot trunk of the Dart, firming it down as he went. He tried to think of the attaché case as being packed with money—the backing he would need to bring Reno to its knees—but, damn it, he thought in swift rebuttal, what if it's just papers, documents, spy stuff, blueprints for some newfangled way to wipe out a continent at a time?

CIA guys ran around in big black cars, didn't they?

Sweat broke out on his brow and he wiped it off on the sleeve of his shirt, which had taken a beating at the brook too, like his pants. He looked like hell—a bum with an uneven swath of two-day beard running across his upper lip and nervous, shifty eyes. Martha would drag him in off the street and throw him in the tub.

But he was fourteen bucks ahead . . .

He phoned Martha at 8:15. He told her he'd had trouble with the car, which was no lie, and would have to stay over another night. He was eighty-six dollars ahead and felt good enough to go out and buy himself a meal. He hadn't had anything to eat since the Twinkies for breakfast.

Coming back from the restaurant, he went by the car, laid his eyes on the lid of the trunk, imagined bundles of cold cash in the attaché case, went back into the casino, and began betting five dollars a hand on blackjack. By 10:30 he had \$223 all told, counting what he'd started with. He got up and stretched, let one of the bouncy little barmaids hand him a drink, and began wandering around. His concentration had been intense and he needed to relax.

The casino was crowded now. He put some coins into one of the slot machines just to change the rhythm of things and then joined a noisy crowd around one of the craps tables. He no longer felt like a bum. He was a player, sure-footed, with money in the shabby pants, plus that loaded attaché case in the car—a player with all the backup he could possibly need. He felt great, unbeatable.

A big man had the dice, rubbing and shaking them in hands held high, a clutch of bills and a heap of chips in front of him on the table. A big roller. He looked familiar to Baker—he'd seen that face somewhere. He rolled his point, a ten, and let out a whoop—and Baker knew who he was. Crazy Cal Cashmore, a car dealer from the valley who was on TV every night as his own pitchman on the late late shows Tim and Martha sometimes watched. Junk theater. He looked different here, redder in the face, and there was no cowboy hat over the disarrayed greying hair.

He rolled again—a seven—another whoop rent the air, and Baker's x-ray eyes scanned the big man's face. You owe me something, he said to himself, for all those crummy commercials, and he got out a handful of five-dollar chips. Cashmore rolled again—a six—and Baker put a twenty on "Come"—the only money there—and watched with an uncanny sense of certainty as Cashmore sevens out, doubling Baker's money. He picked up his chips and studied the ongoing game, a lot of which he didn't understand, until the dice came around to Cashmore again.

Cashmore rolled a nine, and Baker put forty dollars on "Come" again. He watched with confidence enough to have bet his house that Cashmore would roll a seven—which he did, accompanied by a muttered curse, his eyes flicking across Baker's face. Baker picked up his chips and walked away, his step light as a kid's, the ankle almost better again.

He played a little more blackjack and won a few more dollars, but his mind was still at the craps table. That's where the big money was won, that's where the guys with backup dough played the game. And he was a guy with backup dough now—lots of it. Casually he gave the blackjack dealer a two-dollar tip and went back to the craps table, but the ebullient crowd had thinned and Cashmore was no longer there. A guy about his own size and age and condition was standing next to him and Baker asked him where the big man had gone.

"Home, probably," he said. "That's Crazy Cal Cashmore. He's your true gambler. Comes over a couple of times a week and takes back a big wad."

"He always wins?"

"Not always—but mostly, that I've seen. He's a lucky roller."

"Not always, like you say," Baker said, remembering the sixty dollars he'd won on a couple of Cashmore's bad rolls.

There was no conceivable way he was going to get into the attaché case—not tonight, anyway, and maybe not even at home, where he had some tools to work with. He had rented a motel room without even asking the price, laid his pants out under the mattress to press them, taken a shower, shaved with an outfit he'd bought at an all-night drugstore, and was now examining the case again on his bed, the first real shot he'd had at it. It was made of heavy-gauge metal, covered with some kind of fake-leather stuff, and the visible hardware, including the cunning little padlocks, looked like surgical steel, or something even harder than that. Nothing to do about it now. He put it under the pillow next to his, said good-night to it as if it were a person, and went to sleep, the seedling of an idea already sprouting in his mind.

He was on the road at seven, with a good breakfast under his belt, easing the old Dart up the summit on Route 70 to begin the long downhill run—on which he could coast most of the way—to the town where he lived. He got to his bank a little after it opened at ten—unwitnessed, as far as he could tell—and shortly had his safe-deposit box in hand. There wasn't much in it—the grant deed and paid-off note on their house and a dozen Series E bonds he and Martha had managed to buy through the years before he was forced to retire. He removed the grant deed and note, put them in an envelope the girl provided, and watched her slide the box back into its narrow slot. Then he returned to the Dart, and



continued on downslope to the valley, turning south on the freeway toward Sacramento and driving until he came to the off-ramp leading to Crazy Cal Cashmore's monstrous car emporium. It was big enough to hold a war on and it took Baker five minutes to thread his way through its lanes to the new-car salesroom.

A salesman greeted him at the door and, with his help, Baker had picked out the car he wanted in less than twenty minutes. He had the attaché case in his hand.

"Now," he said, "I want to see Crazy Cal."

"You don't need to do that," the salesman said. "I can handle the deal."

"Not this deal," Baker said.

Crazy Cal's office was on the second floor of the building, with a solid glass wall overlooking the glittering spread of cars below. Crazy Cal had just taped a TV commercial and had a lot of makeup on. He looked different from the way he had last night—healthier.

Baker said to him, "You got a car I want to buy. I'll draw high card with you for it."

"Says which?"

"The car costs \$7,200—license, tax, and what-not included. Your salesman here has the deal written up. I'll draw high card with you for it. I win, you give me the car. You win, I don't get the car and I give you \$7,200."

Cal tipped his ten-gallon hat back on his head and Baker knew he was hooked. Now to set in firm. With respectful care he put the attaché case on Cal's enormous desk, Cal's eyes tracking. "What's in there?" he said.

Baker had cleaned up the case and it looked impressive sitting there with its three jewel-like locks. "Wealth," he said.

"Open it."

"No. This don't get opened except in a bank vault with an armed guard present."

"I can get an armed guard."

"No. He'd be yours, not mine."

"Show me the \$7,200 cash."

"No. I don't deal in cash. This here," Baker said, taking the envelope from his shirt pocket, "is the grant deed and paid-off mortgage on my house. Get one of your people to draw up a note for \$7,200, due ten days from date, and I'll put up the house as security."

"What's the house worth?"

"A hell of a lot more than the car."

The salesman was standing by, searching for the right look for his face. A well built female secretary had drifted in. Cashmore said to her, "Go draw a note like the man said, and bring me a deck of cards." His face was starting to get red under the makeup, his gambling color.

"Sealed cards," Baker said.

"Sealed," Cashmore agreed. The man couldn't resist a bet.

The girl brought the cards in and Cashmore had the flustered salesman unseal and shuffle them and place them on the desk, neatly squared. Cashmore was rubbing his big hands together as though they were cold, a born gambler. Baker had his left hand on the attaché case for luck and his right hand was touching the cards. "Ties don't count," Baker said, and Cashmore nodded agreement.

Baker's fingers tightened on the cards and he turned up a six of spades, his heart missing a beat. He watched Cashmore grin happily before he quickly, with an expert snap of the wrist, turned up a six of clubs. Cashmore's rubbery face fell and they both sighed audibly; the salesman, eager to please, shuffled the cards again and set them up. "You first this time," Baker said, and Cashmore cut the king of clubs and laughed, his ears as red as Russian flags.

"Clubs!" he said. "My favorite suit. Beat that if you can."

"Well there's four ways to do it," Baker said, and he chose one of them, turning up the ace of spades. "Spades," he said. "My favorite suit." His left hand, pressed against the attaché case, was wet.

The partisan audience was shocked. The salesman whispered, "Does this mean I don't get a commission?"

"Get back down on the floor," Cashmore growled, "and *sell* some goddamn cars!" Then he said to Baker, eyes narrowed, "Haven't I seen you someplace before?"

"I got that kind of face," Baker said.

The Dart just up and quit, Baker told his wife—it just couldn't make the grade any more. They were in the kitchen looking out the window at the shiny new car in the drive.

"You mean you *bought* that thing?" Martha said, fingers splayed across her lips.

"So to speak. Anyway, I got the use of it. Got two new pairs of pants

too, and a shirt and a broad-brimmed hat like the ranchers wear. And new shoes, cowboy style. You got to dress the part, y'know." What he saw in his mind's eye was himself at the tables in Reno, hat tipped insouciantly back on his head like so many others he'd seen there. Really cool, the money rolling his way.

She put her hands on his chest and said, "You didn't sell the bonds to buy the car, did you, Timmy?"

"No, I didn't sell the bonds."

"Then you did real well on this trip, didn't you? I knew you would."

"I did real well, sweetie-pie."

She touched the place on his cheek where he'd cut himself with the new razor, but she didn't say anything. Baker knew he couldn't pull the wool over her eyes for long, that he'd have to tell her the whole thing. But only after I get that damn case open, he thought grimly. I won't even know what the story is myself until then.

He worked on it that night with the few tools he had in his shop, drawing a hacksaw blade across the loop of one of the tiny locks for ten patient minutes, but barely marring the shine of the thing. Case-hardened surgical steel, he thought, or some new stuff they brought back from the moon.

He'd made room in the narrow garage for the new car. He ran a proud hand over the gleaming hood. He'd told the salesman at Crazy Cal's that the Dart was his for the keeping, and transferred only the undistributed samples of TXY or whatever it was to the new car. Then he'd stopped in to see Mr. Thomas on his way back up the valley, turned in his report, and collected his mileage—a tidy sum, he would have thought two days before. Thomas said he'd done fairly well for the first time around—one nibble, anyway—and when he asked Baker if he wanted to keep the job, Baker said he did almost too eagerly. Then he bought his new clothes and got back to the bank in time to return the deed and note to the safe-deposit box before going on home.

I'm living a lie, he thought, as he tooled smoothly up the sharply rising grade of Route 70 early Monday morning. He made two quick calls on easily accessible ranchers to mitigate the lie a little, but the magnet of Reno overpowered all lesser considerations and he was there before noon.

By three-thirty he'd parlayed the hundred and fifty in cash he'd brought along to something near a thousand, and the part of him not yet incor-

porated into the new persona was suddenly scared. It seemed too much, too easy. The new hat casually tipped back on his head felt awkward there. He got up and left the table.

Monday was a slow day along Virginia Street, the casino parking lots less than half full, his new car conspicuous beside the thinly scattered ranks of older metal. Three times he'd come out to see if it was still there—that this was not all some senile dream—and now was the fourth. He'd wrapped the attaché case in burlap and hidden it under sample bags of the stuff he was supposed to be selling. It was full of hundred-dollar bills, totalling God knows what dizzying sum. He was convinced of that now, having systematically examined and discarded all the other possibilities—all save one, but that would come later. He might be a millionaire. All he had to do was find a way into the attaché case without destroying the contents. But in the meantime he felt sure-handed again.

By ten o'clock that night he'd won close to three thousand dollars, circulating the blackjack tables of a half dozen downtown casinos, getting to be a familiar face—a *player*—the tilted-back hat comfortable now, leaving tips in his wake, the way a player should. Why, hell, he thought, I've got enough for a new roof on the house—a fleeting fancy, amended upward at once, savoring the foretaste of real wealth, to a new *house*, a new *everything*, those things they needed. Martha's carefully hoarded pennies for this and for that, kept in labeled envelopes and hidden jars, were a thing of the past.

He rubbed his hands together for warmth and luck, the way Crazy Cal did with the dice between his paws. But he didn't need luck. He had backing.

He wakened early in the morning with the lie laid out in bed beside him where Martha usually was, and just as alive. It had kept prodding him through a brief night's sleep, unlike Martha, with sharp elbows and cold, cold feet. He'd played craps until 2:30 A.M., learning the game as he went, and learning it well, rubbing his hands together with the best of them. He had nearly five thousand bucks under his pillow now. That plus the car was over twelve grand in earned money—IRS kind of money; there could be an agent outside the door right now. *They'd* have to be told; and he'd have to tell Martha, inventing language as he went, because he'd never kept a nickel's worth of anything from her before. And what about Mr. Thomas, who'd hired him in good faith?

He got up and took a long soothing shower, got dressed with a change of underwear and a fresh shirt, and went across the street from the motel for breakfast, buying a copy of each of the morning papers at the door as he went in. Last Saturday evening at home, while Martha was fixing supper, he'd walked up to town and bought copies of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Sacramento Bee* and studied them carefully for any news of a big heist, looking for a clue to the source—if not the destiny—of his staggering windfall. But he had found nothing, as he found nothing again today.

It was eight o'clock when he finished—neither early nor late in this town where the time was always now, the money always changing hands. He could feel its lure and walked down Virginia Street to the nearest casino, sat down at a blackjack table where the dealer had a known face, like his own was getting to be. They nodded at each other in recognition. In half an hour he lost \$200. But, hell, he thought, he could afford to lose, and when you can afford to lose you always win—it's an ironclad law. He broke even for the next hour and then began to lose again and was down another \$200 when he quit and went back out into the sunshine and gas fumes of Virginia Street. Something had been missing in the morning's play, a certain élan, a sharpness of the x-ray eye. But, what the hell, he thought.

He walked back up to the motel, got his car, and headed north out of town. He'd take a break for a while, make a few *pro forma* calls on some ranchers, and then get back to the play. He owed at least that to Thomas, to distribute a few brochures and sample bags. Tonight when he got home he'd call him up and resign. It was the only right thing to do.

A rancher named Emory said he'd think about it and then maybe order a load next year, and Baker was about to turn away as usual when he stopped himself. "Well," he said, "if you think it'll do you some good next year it'll do you the same amount of good this year. Won't it?"

"I don't know," Emory hedged. "You don't seem to know much about the stuff—you called it by two different names already."

"All I've got to know about it," Baker said, his selling dander up for the first time, "is that it works. Guys over in the valley have been making money off it for two years now. Their forage goes farther and they get a better price for their cattle. Read what it says in that brochure there. Those guys ain't lying."

"Well, I don't know—"

"Take a ton," Baker said, shooting for the moon. "You'll be the first rancher this side of the Sierra to use it—and you'll get your money back at market time, plus a hell of a lot more."

"Well, I don't know—"

"Take two tons," Baker said wildly. "At two tons you get a price break."

"What kind of a break?"

"Well," Baker said, "let's go set down someplace and figure it out."

The gravel road leading to Emory's ranch was three miles long and Baker stopped the car and turned off the ignition when he reached its intersection with the highway. He wanted to think about what had just happened. He hadn't really expected to make a sale, so he had no idea what his commission would be on two tons of the stuff, but it sure as hell wouldn't approach what he could make in a half hour at blackjack or craps. Still, he sensed the difference between the money he'd just earned and the money he'd won earlier. Earned money wouldn't buy you any more groceries, buck for buck, than won money, but at least a working stiff didn't go around rubbing his hands together like they were two boy scouts he was trying to start a fire with—the way Crazy Cal and all those other big rollers seemed to do. And himself too, lately.

He sighed noisily, debating a choice. He could turn left for Reno, or right for Route 70 and a bunch more ranchers to call on. Or he could go straight home and go to work seriously on the attaché case, and live off the proceeds forever, maybe not even telling Martha about it.

A Nevada state cop's car cruised south on the highway in front of him, chasing no one. It meant nothing to Baker—cops didn't scare him—but it stirred a latent thought in his mind, one he'd circled carefully several times already without rousing. *The attaché case could be full of dope.* He still eyed the thought askance. He hated dope and the whole dope world, from grower to user; he didn't like thinking about it. But it couldn't be dope because the fierceness of his hatred for it would have told him so—he would have smelled it out like one of those narc dogs and it wouldn't have worked for him as backup, wouldn't have had the magic.

Or was that true? Was that why his luck had changed this morning? Had the magic come from some other source, maybe out of sheer necessity, mothering some new wave of resolve in Baker himself? He liked that idea and knew it was what Martha would think if he were debating the issue with her. He turned right and drove north for Route 70 . . .

He pulled off the road into the shade of a cluster of trees and stopped. He got out, opened the car's trunk, and removed the attaché case. It wasn't leaving him alone. It was demanding attention, action. For the hundredth time he examined it, sniffed it, shook it. And with his x-ray eyes he saw inside whatever he chose to see—more persistently now, dope, sleek plastic bags of it. He had to get inside.

He slipped a corner of the case under the left rear tire of the car, thinking the weight would crack it open, but the mushy-looking radials wouldn't damage it at all. He searched around for a rock big enough to smash down on the hinged spine of the case, or on the cunning little locks themselves, but found none.

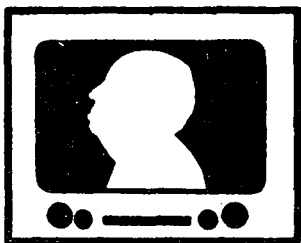
And then he wondered, why do I have to get into it? He gazed for a moment at the lovely cerulean sky overhead, the pristine High Sierra landscape. Whatever it was, it had done for him all the good it could do. Open, it would be a betrayed secret, a Pandora's box of troubles.

He squared his shoulders, feeling neat and tidy in his new clothes, his left ankle almost pain-free braced in the ninety-dollar boots. And twenty minutes from here was that rancher who'd turned him down last week, said maybe next year, like Emory had. Baker could hardly wait to get at him again—he ran a big outfit, a three-, maybe a four-ton outfit, a sure sale.

He got back in his shiny new car, the attaché case on the seat by his side, and moved onto the traffic-free highway at moderate speed. The spot where he'd found the damn thing wasn't far away—around a long easy curve and down a fairly steep grade, the brook running alongside on the right.

There was no traffic coming either way and he eased closer to the edge of the high-banked road as he neared the place, the attaché case at the ready, hanging out the window in his left hand. He passed the lumpy little lane up which he'd driven in such haste less than a week before, and then arced the attaché case over the roof of the car and watched it disappear with a quick backward glance. Then he regained the road and resumed speed, checking his rear-view mirror for following traffic, and saw a head appear at the lip of the bank, staring his way, as the car rounded a bend and put the past out of sight.

"Good luck," Baker said—and felt fine.



# CRIME ON SCREEN

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**by Peter Christian**

**S**o *entertaining it's criminal* goes the slogan for the new Public Television series called *Mystery!* currently unfolding across our nation in programs culled from England's finest mystery shows, and we salute the attention and the intelligence it gives our genre.

After a somewhat arch start (a camp adaptation of a forgotten 1920s thriller called *She Fell Among Thieves*) and a somewhat leisurely paced four-part dramatization of Daphne du Maurier's pure-silk suspense romance, *Rebecca*, *Mystery!* will turn to the Sport of Kings—and three fast-paced, modern Dick Francis thrillers. *The Racing Game* is thunderingly good, with smallish sinewy Michael Gwilym—you have seen him mainly in PBS Shakespeare, of all things—just perfect as tough ex-jockey Sid Halley, his career finished in a racing accident in which one hand is left clawed and mangled, turned private eye. (So realistic is Gwilym in the role it is hard to believe he is neither a professional rider nor an amputee.) *The Racing Game* is a winner.

The first story—*Odds Against*—shows how Sid first comes a cropper, and how his marriage trips up as well. But his ex-wife's wealthy father, who has always had a great deal of respect for Sid's tenacity and intelligence, asks the retired National Hunt champion jockey to investigate why mysterious accidents are happening at the Seabury Race Course. He strongly suspects businessman Howard Graves wants to buy the land cheap in order to build a supermarket—"There's something nasty under



his two-hundred-quid dinner jacket." At first, Sid, licking his wounds, balks at the task ("You thought I'd do a Philip Marlowe") but finally agrees ("I reckon I owe it to racing"). He enlists a friend, a frisky, wise-cracking karate-trainer named Chico Barnes, to be his partner and very needed right-hand man, and together they stir up trouble on the turf.

Graves is a bounder—we know that from the first as we watch him use a highly polished, carefully positioned cigarette-case to cheat at poker, not because he needs the money but because (like James Bond's notorious card-cheat, Goldfinger) he hates to lose. He soon sends out toughs to lean on his new enemies. Like most American crime series on television, there are fights and violence. The violence is justified by the heavy with this observation: "Jump jockeys are a breed. They're used to pain. They're made that way." Sid gets his share of pain. There is also, in the first episode, an ingenious mechanical device intended to cripple an entire race, and a fever-pitch climax in which—very much like the early Pearl White serials—a boiler is about to blow, bringing our hero's career to an abrupt end.

In the second show, *Trackdown*, Sid and Chico are established as private investigators, and the jockey's useless appendage has been replaced by a sort of bionic arm, responding to electric impulses from his muscles. He is still clumsy with the device—especially when holding eggs or glassware—and his arm dangles heavily (in the first episode he had to keep it buried in his coat pocket), but the steel core certainly comes in handy when thugs try to beat him to a bloody pulp.

*Trackdown* (also the name of the duo's private-eye agency) begins with our watching the actual birth of a colt at the stables of a country estate—an event which is to be very significant to the solution. A crusty millionaire asks our team to investigate why his dead certs always get beaten at the races . . . and the answer is both surprising and satisfying.

The third episode, *Gambling Lady*, begins dramatically when a prize racehorse escapes his stable and is killed running out onto the highway into a milk lorry. The animal was insured for 40,000 pounds, so Sid is hired to investigate. His probing leads him to the erratic betting habits of a wealthy Italian family, and a scheme worthy of *The Silver Blaze*. The very best of a trio of good stories, this episode is a high-gloss mixture of good writing and good acting. Dick Francis has an editorial hand in the

series, and the programs were filmed at authentic English racetracks (York, Doncaster, Wetherby) and stables. It gets the purse.

*Mystery!* will end its current run with three cases investigated by that Victorian Scotland Yard stalwart created by Peter Lovesey, Sergeant Cribb (Alan Dobie), a gunless criminal investigator of working-class background to whom mysteries are "a grand game." The turn-of-the-century England which are the settings make interesting counterpoint to Sid Halley's more modern villains, closing out a first-rate first season of mystery television.

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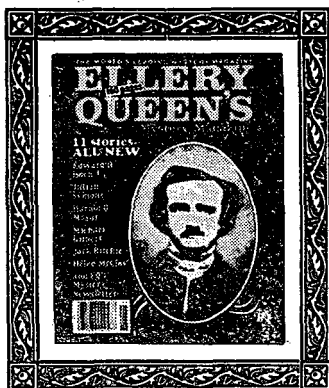
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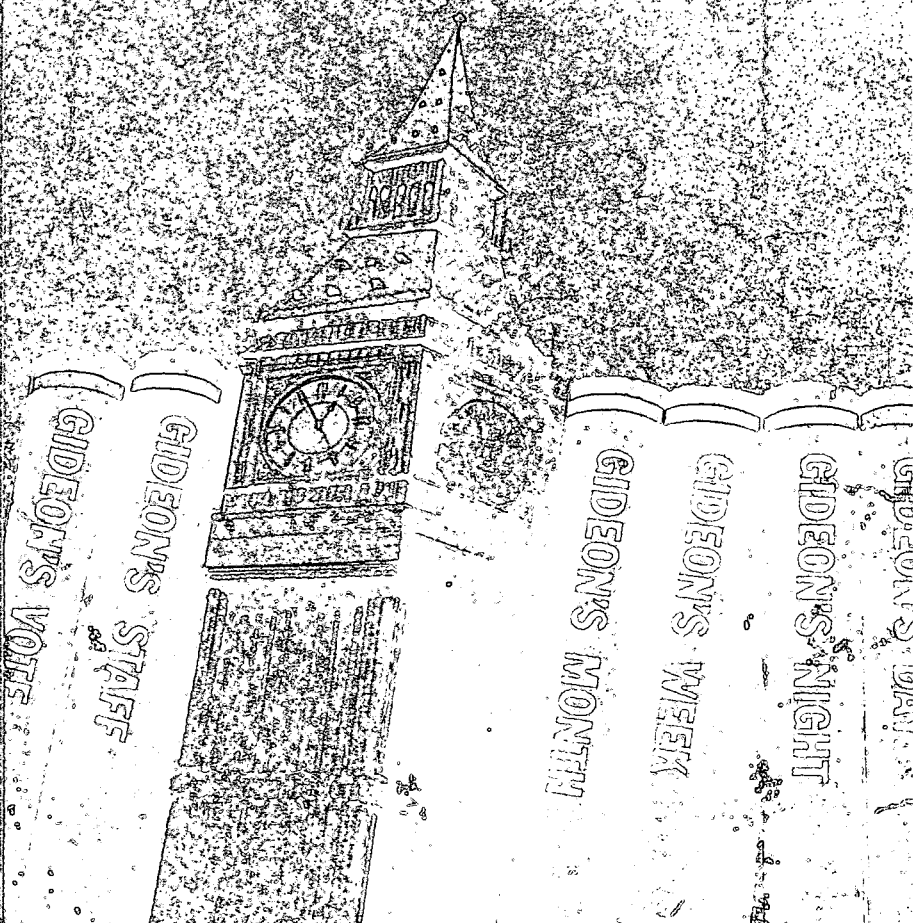
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